

Project HOME

Final Evaluation Report

Dana Taplin & Hélène Clark

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Executive Summary

This report sets forth the external evaluation findings on Project HOME, a rapid rehousing program initiated by New Destiny Housing Corporation and pilot-tested at FJCs in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan. Project HOME was launched by New Destiny Housing Corporation in collaboration with the Mayor's Office to Combat Domestic Violence (OCDV) and OCDV's FJCs (FJCs), with funding support from the U.S. Department of Justice. With the pilot-test period concluded in September 2017, the program is now renamed HousingLink and expanded to include the FJC in the borough of Queens.

The key idea of Project HOME was to utilize New Destiny's long experience as advocate, developer and manager of affordable housing to help domestic violence survivors find stable, secure housing by connecting eligible prospective tenants with housing providers with affordable units. Finding and building relationships and trust with landlords was envisioned as a key job that could take time. It chose FJC service providers, who serve thousands of victims of domestic violence each year, to identify income-eligible candidates for those units and coordinate a variety of services available at FJCs to help applicants address the trauma of violence. Project HOME helped appropriate clients to prepare strong housing applications and then referred those applications to participating landlords with vacant units. After placement, Project HOME followed up with placed tenants for up to twelve months to see whether their tenancies were going well. Project HOME also offered FJC clients and service providers information, training, and technical assistance about finding and retaining safe, appropriate permanent housing.

New Destiny saw a need in the system for a service that links the demand and supply sides to increase the proportion of domestic violence survivors who can identify and secure safe, stable and affordable housing and that could identify housing for survivors earlier, before they entered shelter. Project HOME brought New Destiny's knowledge of affordable housing in New York City and its relationships in the housing sector to the implementation of a rapid rehousing service that links domestic violence survivors with available housing.

Project HOME filled a niche which FJCs were lacking. It is not within the scope of FJC work to find housing, though they work with clients on legal and self-sufficiency issues. So adding the ability to refer some clients to stable and affordable housing enhanced the existing menu of services. A major part of the Project HOME model is to build trusting relationships with landlords so that more landlords will be willing to accept domestic violence survivors as tenants. An FJC Self-Sufficiency Coordinator interviewed for the interim report saw New Destiny's credibility with landlords as very important in solving the housing problem for some domestic violence clients. People who would otherwise qualify but have blemishes on their records—housing court judgments or bad credit, which many domestic violence clients have—may be looked at more favorably by a landlord who trusts New Destiny.

We found the following accomplishments with Project HOME:

- As of September 2017, Project HOME had placed 51 clients into safe, affordable and permanent housing.

- In placing 51 clients, Project HOME exceeded its pilot goal of 40 placements at the end of Year 3, and did so after falling behind its midterm target as a result of institutional change at OCDV in the first 16 months of the Project HOME pilot. The delay was overcome by good staffing, follow-up, problem-solving and the program building momentum with landlord relationships.
- Project HOME proved sustainable, despite changes in affordable housing subsidies and leadership at the OCDV and the FJCs as well as the contextual difficulties described in this report. It is now, in 2018, renamed HousingLink, and continues to work with FJCs to house FJC clients.
- Project HOME now provides Housing Tips, individualized Housing Action Plans and housing information to advocates, case managers and clients to reach more families than those who are currently eligible for an apartment.

Implementation Challenges

1. **Alignment of Referrals and Income Eligibility:** In the early stages of Project HOME, some FJC case managers were referring ineligible clients in hopes that Project HOME could somehow find a way to place them. New Destiny staff worked with FJC coordinators and case managers over the first year and more of the program to adjust the referral and information-provision process and set clear expectations as to what Project HOME could deliver.
2. **Changes at OCDV.** Project HOME experienced a lag in placements in its first year. In retrospect New Destiny staff attributed this to turnover at OCDV, which had three different commissioners during the grant period. Project HOME was unable to provide services during these periods, which cumulatively amounted to nearly 12 months of lost time.
3. **Unforeseen Competition for Affordable Units.** In planning Project HOME New Destiny did not anticipate CityFEPS or LINC (Living in Communities) coming online in six different versions under the new de Blasio mayoralty, or the “tremendous competition” those subsidies would incite for the available housing units.
4. In general, working with potential applicants can be a slow process as paperwork is completed and finding apartments took quite a bit of lead time, but did result in 21 relationships with non-profit and for-profit housing developers who became resources for Project HOME and are now resources for HousingLink.

Although housing is often one of the greatest needs of domestic violence survivors, housing referral is not a service FJCs typically provide. The FJC personnel were happy to have Project HOME from the start but it was a small, pilot program that could hardly find homes for all their clients. Additionally, the early difficulties with referrals and the institutional challenges within OCDV led to some frustration as expressed by FJC program coordinators when interviewed in 2016 for the interim evaluation. Now, after working out its early challenges Project HOME has earned the praise of the FJC Coordinators with whom it works. As one said, “...the thing that’s so important about this program [Project HOME] is it’s the only housing program we can refer to that will take clients through the process of placing them into an apartment.” Domestic violence

survivors have many challenges and cannot easily secure safe, affordable, stable housing without help. For clients who qualify for its housing placement service, Project HOME eliminates many obstacles to securing housing. Even for clients who do not qualify, Project HOME's information, counseling and referral services have been helpful to clients seeking housing or seeking to remain in housing they already have – at least in the view of the FJC Program Coordinators.

Sustainability

Project HOME experienced numerous challenges in the workings of the bureaucracy, the changing policies and availability of government housing assistance and the difficulties of clients. Not all FJC clients were eligible for Project HOME. Project HOME, now called HousingLink, works with clients until they can become eligible, if possible. In spite of the challenges, the program model has endured and become a permanent program of New Destiny, now called HousingLink, continuing to address the affordable housing needs of domestic violence survivors.

HousingLink, through the lessons of the pilot program, Project HOME, now provides:

1. Workshops on housing information in New York City have been expanded and rent subsidies for FJC clients and case managers. This benefits those who are not eligible for a HousingLink apartment.
2. One-on-one technical assistance and information to case managers and advocates so they can help on specific client housing situations.
3. Individual housing eligibility assessment.
4. Pre-screening of clients, assistance with applications and short-term move-in and rental assistance for eligible clients.
5. Contacts and referrals to assist clients after they have been established in secure housing.

HousingLink provides individual Housing Action Plans to everyone who has an assessment and over 350 housing assessments had been conducted by December 2017.

These efforts in the continuation of Project HOME as HousingLink are a broadening of the effort so that more families benefit from housing information, even if they are not currently eligible for an apartment. An original concern of Project HOME was that it was designed for families that were really housing-ready, with good credit, jobs, and sufficient income. Even with good screening, Project HOME expected challenges in meeting income requirements and worked with tenants to attain eligibility if it was possible. It was important to determine if the housing-ready families could, in fact, get housing with the help of services of Project HOME. But Project HOME also wished to offer recommendations and solutions for harder-to-house families and the maturation into HousingLink has moved the services in the direction of serving more families. While the first months of Project HOME screened for families most likely to be able to afford rental housing, it quickly changed to work with a broad range of family incomes. HousingLink

works with families with a median income for a family of three of \$27,000, which is considered low to very low income by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

HousingLink has proven that Project HOME could scale up, serve more families and be sustainable. However, serving a needy set of clients requires funding for the program and additional staff. Compared to the costs of housing a family in shelter, HousingLink is a small fraction and so very cost-effective as well as of great help for families to achieve stability. We strongly recommend that HousingLink continue and be funded at an adequate level.

1. Introduction

This report sets forth the external evaluation findings on Project HOME, a three-year pilot initiative launched by New Destiny Housing Corporation in collaboration with the Mayor’s Office to Combat Domestic Violence (OCDV) and OCDV’s Family Justice Centers (FJCs) with funding support from the U.S. Department of Justice. Project HOME is a rapid rehousing program being pilot-tested at FJCs in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan. With the pilot-test period concluded in September 2017, the program is now renamed HousingLink and has expanded to include the FJC in Queens. The limited budget for the pilot kept the Project HOME staffing to one full-time Director and one part-time Coordinator and they staff HousingLink.

New Destiny described the Project HOME model as follows:

First, Project HOME sponsors workshops providing general information about permanent housing options available in NYC, including rental subsidy programs, for both FJC clients and case managers.

Second, Project HOME offers individual counseling and referrals tailored to the particular circumstances of clients with housing barriers (e.g., negative credit, housing court records).

Third, the program pre-screens clients to determine who might be eligible to apply for available affordable units in projects operated by 21 non-profit and for-profit landlords. Using funding from the US Department of Justice, Project HOME has provided short-term rental assistance to most of the tenants placed.

Finally, Project HOME follows up with clients placed in housing to assess how they are doing, if they have any problems with the unit, landlord, or rent payment, or if any other issues (e.g., harassment from the batterer) have emerged. Tenants with issues may be referred back to the FJCs or to other appropriate agencies. To date, all of the tenants placed by Project HOME have retained their housing—some for almost three years.

FJCs are multi-agency, multi-disciplinary, co-located service centers that provide services to victims of interpersonal violence, including domestic violence, sexual assault, child abuse, elder or dependent adult abuse, and human trafficking. Both public and private partner agencies assign staff on a full-time or part-time basis to provide services from one location. Centers focus on reducing the number of times victims tell their stories, the number of places victims must go for help; and on increasing access to services and support for victims and their children.¹ New Destiny chose FJCs in New York City as the locus of Project HOME activities for several reasons. At its inception, a period when rental subsidies were very scarce, Project HOME focused on domestic violence clients with sufficient incomes to afford the rents of “affordable” housing units without subsidy. A previous New Destiny pilot program, Project Safe Home, had operated at New York City housing shelters, but shelters overwhelmingly serve lower income clients, whereas the FJC clients exhibit a range of incomes. Additionally, Project HOME sought to help domestic violence clients find safe, stable housing solutions before circumstances forced them

¹ FJC Alliance website, accessed January 8, 2017. <https://www.familyjusticecenter.org/affiliated-centers/family-justice-centers-2/>

into shelter. While shelters and FJCs both offer the opportunity to make contact with the greatest numbers of domestic violence clients, the FJCs were more likely to bring Project HOME into contact with the kinds of clients the program was designed to help.

The key idea of Project HOME was to utilize New Destiny's long experience as advocate, developer and manager of affordable housing to help domestic violence survivors find stable, secure housing by acting as a kind of non-profit broker between them and housing providers with affordable units. Project HOME sought available affordable housing units from housing providers. The program worked with FJC service providers to identify appropriate candidates for those units, screen the candidates on eligibility criteria, and coordinate a variety of services available at FJCs to help applicants become housing-ready. Project HOME followed up with tenants for up to twelve months after placement to see whether their tenancies were going well. Project HOME also offered FJC clients and service provider's information, training, and technical assistance to help clients find and retain safe, appropriate permanent housing.

As we wrote in the Interim Evaluation Report, Project HOME is an innovative, promising practice that builds on New Destiny's expertise and relationships in the affordable housing space to provide education and counseling on housing options and subsidies, and, for those who qualify, placement into permanent affordable housing. Project HOME fills a gap between the case management services provided at the FJCs and the work of housing providers. Project HOME brings New Destiny's knowledge of developing and managing housing for domestic violence survivors to the work of screening, preparing and supporting clients who qualify for apartments. Housing providers are not social workers. They freely admit they do not have the means to track and troubleshoot for tenants from vulnerable populations. Project HOME provides a go-between service that has exceeded its pilot-program target of the rapid rehousing of 40 domestic violence survivors into safe, stable housing.

Project HOME's efforts to improve the referral and pre-screening process at FJCs has enabled the program to become a force in housing beyond the ability to place individual clients. In the interim report we reviewed the iterative adjustments Project HOME made to the process of informing clients of Project HOME's services and recruiting eligible candidates for affordable housing. In the view of FJC Program Coordinators, these iterative improvements have helped Project HOME have a beneficial impact on clients with housing needs who do not meet the income eligibility guidelines for tax-credit financed affordable units. Project HOME had initially relied on FJC case managers to determine income eligibility. When too many ineligible clients were referred to Project HOME, New Destiny decided to hold monthly information sessions instead, which would allow the program to recruit several eligible candidates at once and provide useful housing-related information to clients ineligible for Project HOME. In a subsequent tweak, New Destiny shifted the one-on-one counseling from the Project HOME Director or Coordinator back to the case managers, who could then take further initiative to inquire with Project HOME on behalf of a client about one of the housing programs or services introduced at an information session. Throughout this period of adjusting the intake and information provision sequence, Project HOME's identity remained that of a program for placing eligible clients in affordable housing. Now, at the end of the three-year pilot, the program's identity appears to have broadened to that of a housing advocate and specialist that helps

people move into housing in various ways: By disseminating useful information, by providing individual counseling and referrals, and by placing eligible clients into affordable housing units.

From New Destiny's perspective, the institutional environment of OCDV and the FJCs has stabilized in the past year and a half, allowing Project HOME to hone its processes and strengthen its relationships. The FJC program coordinators in the Bronx, Brooklyn and Manhattan, contacted for follow-up feedback in fall 2017, report smooth, effective functioning, substantial growth in placement success, effective service to non-qualifying clients around their housing options, crucial information provision on housing and subsidies to FJC service providers, and effective after-care.

While New Destiny and Project HOME have no control over the income eligibility criteria for apartments created under federal low-income housing tax credit law and regulations, it would appear that the availability of reasonably high-quality municipal rental subsidies and some Section 8 units would offset the strictness of eligibility criteria for Tier I and Tier II clients seeking housing in New York City.

New Destiny has developed a successful model of collaboration with non-housing service providers within the FJC structure and with landlords. From the perspective of FJC coordinators, this success is impressive, given that so much work has been accomplished by a staff of one full-time Director and one part-time Coordinator. Staffing of the Project HOME pilot is not limited by design but by the funding levels New Destiny was able to secure for the pilot. One FJC Coordinator suggested that new staff support for the onsite services at FJCs, including workshops, counseling and referral, pre-screening and housing application assistance, would allow the Project HOME Director to focus her energies on widening the relationships with landlords so as to increase the supply of units made available to DV survivors through Project HOME. Whether that is the best division of labor or whether some other way of distributing the work seems more advantageous, a multi-faceted, service-intensive program like Project HOME that does such important work with a vulnerable population with such success deserves sufficient financial resources to make the workload sustainable. Among the challenges in the Project HOME pilot was finding the best ways of coordinating the referral process with FJC service providers and to build working relationships with housing providers. The pilot program has had to negotiate administrative and programmatic changes at OCDV and the FJCs that affected its ability to operate. Early on Project HOME faced unexpectedly challenging competition for available affordable housing units. Despite these challenges Project HOME has exceeded its goal of 40 client placements at the end of Year 3, having in fact placed 51 clients.

This Final Report of the external evaluation was conducted by ActKnowledge, a social sector planning and evaluation organization located in the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. ActKnowledge prepared an interim evaluation report on Project HOME in September 2016, which reviews in detail the difficult institutional environment and implementation challenges New Destiny faced in the first year and one-half of Project HOME. In this report we summarize developments since the interim report and focus on the accomplishments of the pilot project overall.

2. The Model and Its Background

Background. Finding housing in the competitive New York City environment is difficult for nearly everyone, especially for homeless individuals and families in shelter and domestic violence survivors. Many domestic violence clients find housing on their own with the support of case workers and housing specialists and, if eligible, with New York City or Section 8 housing vouchers. Yet clients may face discrimination on the part of housing providers wary of taking tenants with domestic violence issues, or who have been homeless, or who have bad credit or housing court involvement or other “red flag” issues. Landlords may be skeptical of the new city housing subsidies created under Mayor de Blasio as many landlords were “burned” when a similar municipal subsidy, Advantage NYC, was suddenly discontinued back in 2011, leaving them with newly non-viable tenancies. Domestic violence survivors may struggle to understand how and where to look for affordable housing, or have personal challenges that make it difficult to persevere in the search for housing.

In the New York City housing marketplace, the more affluent buyers and renters can avail themselves of commercial real estate brokers, realtor services and real estate attorneys to help them find available units and navigate the complexities of buying or leasing real property. Many domestic violence survivors and people in shelter cannot afford such services, but, as one of the FJC program coordinators explained, clients often feel pressed to pay a real estate agency fee anyway, often with money they had to borrow or money they could have used to furnish the apartment. Other survivors seek housing on their own.

Project HOME. New Destiny saw a need in the system for a service that links the demand and supply sides to increase the proportion of domestic violence survivors who can identify and secure safe, stable and affordable housing and that could find housing for survivors earlier, before they entered shelter. The name Project HOME stands for “housing opportunities made easy,” and this is the key idea of Project HOME, to make it easier for a larger proportion of domestic violence survivors to secure a safe and sustainable place to live.

Project HOME’s programmatic emphasis was on its housing placement component, for which the program exceeded its target of 40 placements over the three-year period of the pilot. The housing placement component involved operation of a referral and screening process at the FJCs to identify eligible candidates for housing, assist applicants in preparing their applications and gathering the required documentation; and to secure a stream of affordable units from a range of housing providers in the city—as of September 2017 numbering 21 landlords—and through follow-up contact with tenants post placement to troubleshoot.

The program was also described by its FJC partners as effective in helping domestic violence clients who do not qualify for Project HOME’s affordable units find stable housing and/or to negotiate effectively with their present landlords to preserve their tenancies. This information provision and advocacy component of the program involved monthly information sessions, called “Housing Tips,” held by the Project HOME Director and Coordinator, where FJC service providers and interested domestic violence survivor clients could learn about finding housing, rental subsidy programs, tenants’ rights, using housing court to advantage, and other housing related issues. In addition, Project HOME staff provided individual counseling around clients’ particular circumstances and referral to related resources and services.

The program components are described below in greater detail.

- A. Project HOME held monthly workshops at each of the FJCs to provide general information about permanent housing options available in New York City and about rental subsidy programs, for both FJC clients and case managers. The workshops were provided as a service to FJC personnel and clients, whether the clients qualified for Project HOME or not. Project HOME rolled out a revised client workshop curriculum in August 2017, and called the new workshops “Housing Tips.” As New Destiny describes it, they designed Housing Tips to help participants better understand the housing application process. The curriculum topics included permanent housing and how to obtain it, tenant rights and responsibilities, “preparing a winning application,” interviewing successfully for an apartment, and knowing what landlords are looking for in considering a prospective tenant.
- B. The housing workshops offered by Project HOME to FJC staff were incorporated within the FJCs’ core trainings for participating service providers. The staff workshops covered the array of housing options and rental subsidies currently available to domestic violence survivors.
- C. Project HOME offered individual counseling and referral on housing-related matters such as problems with negative credit or housing court involvement.

Clients referred for Project HOME housing placement by the FJC case managers are “pre-screened” by Project HOME staff on several criteria for their potential to be successful long-term placements. Screening criteria include the following:

- 1) Income, using an instrument that measures a candidate’s ability to pay the rent based on income as a percent of the area median. The official income range is between 40 and 60 percent of area median income (AMI), 60 percent being the cap set by the federal low-income housing tax credit program. While few clients are close to 60 percent, many of the clients placed have incomes at or around 40 percent of AMI. People with incomes below 40 percent of AMI need a subsidy or other rental assistance.
 - a. Most Project HOME Tier I candidates are at about 40 percent of AMI.
 - b. Tier II candidates have incomes at 30 percent of AMI or less and have access to subsidies, either Section 8 or a municipal subsidy such as LINC 3 funding.² Tier II clients who qualify for Project HOME range between 12 and 22 percent of AMI. The easiest-to-place Tier II candidates are those with Section 8 subsidies.
- 2) Housing court and financial issues: Project HOME pre-screening weighs all the relevant factors, including income and earning potential, housing and credit history, and housing court records. Project HOME then determines whether the candidate can be recommended as appropriate for the available unit and referred to a landlord.
- 3) Criminal issues: Project HOME’s pre-screening includes a 50-state criminal record report. For example, an abuser may have falsely alleged criminal activity or coerced a client to participate in criminal activity. Depending on the situation New Destiny may be able to

² Tier III clients also have incomes at 30% AMI or below but, unlike Tier II clients, Tier III clients do not have access to subsidies or other sources of additional income and cannot be placed in housing through Project HOME.

advocate for a given client with a criminal record. Note that criminal history has not been an issue for any of the clients referred for placement under Project HOME to date.

- 4) Safety: All domestic violence applicants are screened to make sure that any new housing options offered are in locations that will be safe for the client. For any given client this might rule out certain available units which happen to be located close to the batterer or the batterer's friends and family.

D. A major part of the Project HOME model is to build trusting relationships with landlords so that a larger proportion of landlords will be more willing to accept a larger proportion of domestic violence survivors as tenants. Project HOME does this in several ways:

- 1) Through its careful recruitment process (honed over time as described in the interim evaluation report) which assures that clients referred to the program by service providers at the FJCs meet the income eligibility requirements at a minimum
- 2) Through its equally careful pre-screening process which uncovers and evaluates any weaknesses in a client's qualifications before s/he is referred to a landlord
- 3) Through assiduous attention to the complex application process (required for affordable units created under the federal Low Income Housing Tax Credit program)
- 4) By acting as intermediary between landlord and applicant throughout the lease-up process
- 5) In its after-care troubleshooting follow-up which identifies and finds solutions for problems that may crop up three or more months after move-in

E. Project HOME assists FJC clients with completing their application to rent an affordable housing unit. Affordable units, created under the federal low-income housing tax credit program, have exacting documentation requirements. Project HOME assists clients with having all the necessary, up-to-date documentation ready to submit when an apartment is identified.

F. With funds provided by the U.S. Department of Justice, Project HOME provides temporary assistance with leasing costs (e.g., first month's rent and security and time-limited rental assistance) to support a new tenancy. These funds have assisted most of the tenants placed to date.

G. Project HOME includes regular "after care," or follow-up calls and other forms of outreach to clients, which begin after the first month of tenancy and follow quarterly thereafter for up to one year, and sometimes beyond. This contact allows staff to determine whether the tenancies are going well and to identify and plan to troubleshoot any problems. Project HOME is also available to landlords for help in resolving any issues that may arise with tenants placed through Project HOME.

H. Project HOME currently partners with three financial literacy and capability organizations which provide financial coaching, asset building, and long term financial stability counseling.

4. Program Outcomes

According to New Destiny, Project HOME pre-screened a total of 336 potential applicants for housing since its launch in Fall 2014.

- Applicants have been overwhelmingly female—96 percent—most of whom have children. The typical family, according to HousingLink’s most recent statistics, is a mother with one or two children.
- Project HOME clients have a median income of \$31,200 and a mean income of \$27,678. Incomes range from a low of \$9,000 to a high of \$80,000.
- Seventy-three potential applicants have rental vouchers.
- As of September 2017, Project HOME had placed 51 clients into safe, affordable and permanent housing.
- In placing 51 clients, Project HOME exceeded its pilot goal of 40 placements at the end of Year 3 by 11 placements—28 percent—and did so despite falling behind its midterm target as a result of institutional change at OCDV in the first 16 months of the Project HOME pilot. The successes took time and momentum to build, as relationships were formed; Project HOME worked with city agencies and FJCs, and landlords and service providers began to understand and trust the program.
- Of the 51 clients placed, 20 have rental vouchers.
- All the tenants placed by Project HOME have retained their housing. Twenty-three percent for three years and 32 percent for over one year.
- Project HOME has conducted 14 advocate workshops attended by 302 advocates from the FJCs and their partner agencies.
- Project HOME has conducted 75 client workshops attended by 323 clients referred by the FJC.

With regard to the program’s after-care component, Project HOME has conducted or provided:

- 66 check-ins
- 80 attempted contacts
- 44 aftercare referrals
- 101 mailings which include a quarterly Project HOME newsletter

Follow-up interviews in fall 2017 with three FJC Program Coordinators show that Project HOME has earned their trust and support. One Coordinator commented on “the many success stories” among clients who have found affordable housing through Project HOME. Tenants, she remarked, are “incredibly thankful to be in housing” where they can “get back on their feet.” She explained that they have worked with service providers at the FJC to “manage expectations” of what Project HOME can deliver. She also described Project HOME as “very transparent regarding the services they provide,” that Project HOME lets a client know right away if they do

not meet eligibility or credit criteria. If they have had financial abuse or fraud issues Project HOME will refer them to appropriate services.”

There is continuing frustration about the eligibility guidelines for affordable housing, which program coordinators and FJC service providers may unfairly associate with Project HOME. One coordinator said the strictness of the income guidelines can be disheartening, where a difference of \$25 per year under the threshold or over the limit can kill a client’s chances.³ Project HOME and HousingLink have no role, however, in setting income guidelines for this federal program.

Housing is a huge issue for our clients—for New Yorkers overall. Huge demand—and we don’t have any other options. We have lists of landlords that can take certain vouchers. Clients get vouchers at the shelter-- let’s say they got a FEPS voucher for \$1,213. If the rent is \$1,214 it doesn’t work. It doesn’t work if it’s a dollar less! It’s ludicrous like that!... It’s one of my biggest concerns. You can be a dollar, even 10 cents off—really, 10 cents? Who does that?! And you’re preventing a family from having proper housing.”

However, the availability of municipal and Section 8 rental subsidies helps alleviate the challenge of meeting income guidelines. Whereas, in its earlier phase Project HOME placed mainly Tier 1 clients (who can afford the apartments without subsidy), the program has been able to work successfully with many Tier II clients now that reasonably high quality subsidies are available.

Providing Information, Counseling and Referrals. Beyond the particular clients it helps move into housing, Project HOME provided monthly Housing Tips workshops to inform many other clients and service providers about housing opportunities and tenants’ rights. Project HOME also connects clients with housing attorneys for help—for example, with bifurcating a lease signed by both victim and abuser. Clients are connected with service providers who may be able to help them with their barriers.

One FJC Program Coordinator spoke to the program’s value as information provider. While Project HOME has helped move certain people into housing, she saw it as helping other FJC clients find or sustain housing by providing essential information clients would not otherwise have in the monthly workshops and by connecting clients with helpful resources:

One thing that is very beneficial, aside from helping families who do meet the criteria, is the workshops. People learn about the resources, about exercising their rights when they’re looking for apartments. Maybe they don’t qualify for [Project HOME,] but they get empowered. If the landlord is not following up, they can go to housing court if something is wrong—the ceiling is leaking, whatever—they can go to housing court rather than stop paying rent. They learn the right strategy. And they learn about all the programs that are available out there. So we have another group of clients who got the information through the

³ N.B.: The income eligibility rules are set not by New Destiny. They apply to all “affordable” housing units created under federal low-income housing tax credit law and regulations. These are the apartments Project HOME deals in.

workshops who were able to get apartments, or keep the apartments they already had.

Project HOME Leadership. As described above, the Project HOME program model is carefully synthesized from several interlocking mechanisms—the information sessions, liaison with FJC personnel, the referral/intake process, prescreening of candidates, support and assistance in preparing the application, cultivating relationships with landlords, and robust aftercare. It has taken time to work out this organizational and procedural structure. This accomplishment is due in part to the capabilities of the Project HOME Director, at least from the perspective of the FJC coordinators with whom Project HOME works. In follow-up interviews in fall 2017, FJC program coordinators underscored the importance of the Director’s capabilities to the program’s success. One coordinator praised the Project HOME Director’s abilities, from program organization and coordination to empathy with clients to relationships with landlords after care follow-up. Another coordinator emphasized the Project HOME Director’s knowledge of housing options and subsidies as a valuable onsite resource for caseworkers at FJCs who may not have such complete knowledge or not be able to keep up with changes in the system. She echoed the coordinator quoted above in commending the empathy and sensitivity which the Project HOME Director brings to her meetings with domestic violence survivors. The importance of these remarks lies in bringing to the forefront the crucial role that good staffing can play; and the benefit of Project HOME having had time to work out a system that can work regardless of who is in the Director position. Nonetheless, having the right person in a position is crucial to both success and institutionalization.

Program effectiveness is inevitably a function of individual ability and initiative, but strong organizational and procedural structure can be equally valuable and help make a program resilient in the event that a less competent person succeeds in the leadership position. As described above, the Project HOME program model is carefully synthesized from several interlocking mechanisms—the information sessions, liaison with FJC personnel, the referral/intake process, prescreening of candidates, support and assistance in preparing the application, cultivating relationships with landlords, and robust aftercare.

Relationships with Landlords. As noted above, New Destiny worked hard to build trust with landlords. This work has expanded the supply of affordable units available to Project HOME and set a foundation for the ongoing continuation as HousingLink. On the consumer side, it allows the Project HOME Director to advocate for candidates that may seem questionable to a landlord. Project HOME’s careful pre-screening provides great value to landlords who, as one told us in 2016, do not have the time to do such careful investigation themselves. The pre-screening by a trusted partner makes candidates referred from Project HOME much more attractive to landlords than domestic violence survivors might be otherwise. Building and sustaining close cooperative relationships with housing providers has made Project HOME a viable contender in the competition for a limited supply of affordable housing units. Twenty-one landlord organizations have participated in Project HOME, and New Destiny staff says it is challenging to keep them all engaged every month. Most placements have come from a “solid core” of three or four organizations with relatively large portfolios.

Having earned the trust of its landlord partners, Project HOME can make the difference between a domestic violence survivor getting an apartment and not getting one:

The relationships [the Project HOME Director] has with landlords are really important. [The Director] has even placed undocumented people, [who tend to] have credit issues. Finding housing is a huge impact for undocumented people. It's such a challenge to find an apartment. With Project HOME they get another person to find it for them. And [the Director] can advocate with the landlord. She can say this person may not have great credit but she's working with the financial clinic and she has a plan in place.

Knowing HousingLink is there after placement is reassuring to landlords and has helped sustain the relationships.

Aftercare Follow-up. As one FJC program coordinator explained, "...after care is crucial, especially because clients' situations will change—maybe a good change but maybe back in crisis—maybe the abuser found them, is lurking around, waiting for the client. So the six-month follow-up is very important to see if they've had time to settle into the new apartment, see if they're getting assistance, need help paying the rent." Another coordinator described an after-care situation that can save a tenancy: Project HOME followed up with a client they placed who was paying 30 percent of her income for rent, but a problem with her child's schooling meant she needed help getting a placement in a special school. Without help, she might not have had the ability to continue the rent and have her child in the right school.

In New Destiny's experience, five months after placement is a common point for issues to surface, sometimes but not always related to the abuser. Project HOME's after care follow-up with clients begins as little as one month after placement and continues through the first year of tenancy. The contact can serve to remind a client to reconnect with an FJC service provider for help in solving a problem. For clients who received short-term rental assistance, New Destiny wants to be sure they are engaged with financial service providers to help them revise their household budgets once the assistance ends so they can pay the rent on their own. After-care contact now includes a newsletter, conceived as a way to keep clients connected to services in case they don't reach out to Project HOME. One recent newsletter focused on taxes-- what to do with the refund, how to reengage with the financial clinic if needed, and ways to communicate with Project HOME. As the Project HOME Director put it:

All these things can help keep them in the housing--all working in collaboration, at least in this first year. They can also be linked with the financial clinic for help rebuilding credit, to learn budgeting. Maybe they're not the one in the household who paid the bills, managed the finances, and they don't have the skills. Or they were in shelter and were not used to that responsibility. After-care services make a big difference because coming from domestic violence they have additional problems to the problems everyone else has. Extra challenges, and having that support is very important.

5. Implementation Challenges

Project HOME has overcome significant challenges during its pilot phase, which we summarize below, and described in detail in the interim evaluation report (New Destiny Housing Corporation, Project HOME Interim Evaluation Report, July 2016. New York: ActKnowledge).

Alignment of Referrals and Income Eligibility. Project HOME staff met a significant challenge in working out how best to coordinate the referral process for identifying qualified prospective tenants being served at FJCs. The income eligibility guidelines for “affordable” apartments are quite strict. The former Project HOME Director noted that determining eligibility for the tax credit program was “complicated,” and at the outset, rather than have FJC staff perform a number of eligibility tests, they provided the counselors with some “really simple benchmarks or tools” that could be used:

So somebody would come in they would sit down with their case manager because they'd already identified with their case manager a need for housing. Housing as an issue, or a need. Case manager would sit down and ask 'OK, what is your household size? What is your income? How much money do you make a year?' The client would say I make \$35,000— whatever the number is. The case manager would then look at the chart and say OK, for a household size of 1-2-3-4- whatever, did this person's income conform with the guidelines [for this unit?] And if they fit, they would refer them to me. Effectively clients would be put on my calendar and I would meet with that person. That's how it worked initially.

However, the process did not work smoothly. In many instances FJC case managers referred people who did not meet the Project HOME income criteria. This was due in part to a lack of familiarity with the income guidelines and how to deal with more complicated questions that often arose for clients— for example, how to determine eligibility when a person had income from a number of sources. And in some cases, as noted by FJC staff interviewed, it reflected staff's desire to help the clients as much as they could by referring clients to Project HOME in the hope that an “an exception could be made,” or that “something could be done for them.”

Project HOME then revised its process to direct those not eligible towards other options. Rather than try to get the case managers to follow the income benchmarks more consistently, it was decided instead to switch to a system of monthly information sessions that would accomplish two objectives: 1) to streamline the intake for Project HOME-eligible clients, and 2) to provide useful information to ineligible candidates. The information sessions would reduce case managers' workload by taking the applicants' housing eligibility review off the case managers' plates. Instead, anyone who expressed an interest in housing would be referred to the information session.

The information sessions covered low-income affordable housing programs generally and Project HOME in particular. The Project HOME Coordinator presented material on obtaining affordable housing and the original Project HOME Director presented information about Project HOME. According to the former Project HOME Director:

We also thought it would reduce cycle time... I could do the entire intake process with a group of folks as opposed to meeting with people one-on-one at different

times. We thought it would be effective and efficient for the case managers because it would reduce their burden and it would be friendly to the client because if they weren't Project HOME eligible we could still provide them with some information and resources. For those that were Project HOME eligible I could make that determination, do their intake and set up for following meeting quickly.

Although the information sessions helped, they posed a new challenge. People who were ineligible for Project HOME could sign up at an information session for one-on-one consultations with the Project HOME Coordinator. As a result, the part-time Coordinator's caseload surged by an additional 30 cases a month which was unsustainable given Project HOME's staffing. Thus New Destiny retooled the process again. Now clients ineligible for Project HOME were asked to return to their case managers if they were interested in one of the housing programs introduced in the Coordinator's talk. Then, "the onus is on the case manager to circle back with us. That way it is not so easy for the case managers to say, 'Oh, New Destiny's going to do it.' Which was the reflex."

In this way New Destiny staff worked with FJC coordinators and case managers over the first year and more of the program to fine-tune the referral process and adjust expectations as to what Project HOME could deliver. As one FJC coordinator explained (in fall 2017), they have had to "communicate clearly and consistently about requirements, process, expectations, etc. You know, you've gotta keep the messaging consistent, keep pushing out what it exactly is we're looking for."

Changes at OCDV. Project HOME experienced a lag in placements in its first year which New Destiny attributes to turnover at OCDV, which had three commissioners during the first 18 months of the grant period. Each new commissioner required an assessment of all FJC partner services, including Project HOME, as well as a review and re-signing of the partnership memorandum of understanding (MOU). New Destiny was unable to provide services during these periods, which cumulatively amount to nearly 12 months of time lost. This impeded Project HOME's ability to maintain steady progress toward its direct service goal of 40 placements during the pilot period ending September 2017. Our interim evaluation report indicates 19 client placements as of June 2016 as compared to a target of 30 placements by that time. In the end, Project HOME more than made up for lost time; it reached 51 placements in September 2017—11 more than the 40 placement target. We believe that the program made up for lost time by the fine-tuning of its systems; establishing relationships with landlords; and building momentum that allowed them to move quickly when it became possible.

Unforeseen Competition for Affordable Units. In planning Project HOME, New Destiny did not anticipate CityFEPS or LINC (Living in Communities) coming online in six different versions under the new Mayor, or the "tremendous competition" those subsidies would incite for the available housing units. When the Project HOME pilot began, New Destiny's Project HOME Director said, "There was literally nothing going on with regard to housing homeless families." Under Mayor de Blasio, however, the city developed a number of subsidy programs to help homeless families move from shelter to permanent housing. As the Executive Director explained, the new

municipal initiative to house homeless families increased the competition for the supply of affordable housing units:

The Commissioner of HRA [Human Resources Admin] calling up an affordable housing developer and asking them to provide housing units has a lot more leverage than New Destiny. We had additional competition from Enterprise Community Partners, which is helping the Department of Homeless Services place homeless families. Their program is different than ours—they're dealing with a shelter population, families that are homeless and sheltered—but they've been able, because of strong government support, to exercise more leverage with the affordable housing property managers that we had hoped to target.

The competition for affordable housing units (offered under federal low-income housing tax credit financing) presented an unexpected challenge. Project HOME staff worked hard to overcome the city's competitive advantage by cultivating trusting relationships with housing providers.

Building Relationships with Landlords. The Project HOME pilot set out to test how housing referral and placement for appropriate clients could best be incorporated into the services provided at FJCs. Usually, housing referral for DV survivors is engaged when clients are in shelter, but in this case the idea was to find solutions before shelter became necessary. Landlords offering apartments created under the Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program do not have discretionary latitude on income; they cannot accept anyone with too much income or anyone with too little income without a rent subsidy.

Landlords can take people with lower incomes if they have rental subsidies, but, for other than Section 8 subsidies, Project HOME faced two problems. One, at the time Project HOME was conceived, other sources of rental assistance were unavailable, and two, housing providers in New York were wary of temporary, city-provided subsidies as many felt burned by the sudden demise of the Advantage program. New Destiny wanted to serve Tier II clients as well but needed both a source of rental assistance and time to work with landlords to overcome their anxiety about non-Section 8 forms of subsidy. Thus Project HOME focused on Tier I clients initially, those whose incomes were high enough to afford affordable rents but not too high to exceed the ceiling for New York area median income.

When the LINC and City FEPS subsidies came online with the new mayoral administration, New Destiny could consider working with Tier II clients but faced the challenge of overcoming lingering misgivings about municipal subsidies. As the Executive Director explained, for affordable housing providers the paramount question is the dependability of municipal subsidies— i.e., “How reliable is the subsidy? Will it be eliminated if Mayor de Blasio is not re-elected?” and so on. New Destiny was careful to earn the confidence of landlords by acknowledging and acting on landlord concerns. By building those relationships New Destiny earned the credibility to advocate, where appropriate, for Tier II clients.

After ability to pay the rent, landlords are concerned about the candidate's housing history and credit history: that is, whether prospective tenants have had problems with rent payment or been involved in disputes with landlords that might turn up in housing court record searches.

And whether prospective tenants are a good risk as evidenced by their credit history. There can be many difficulties with clients who, as one of the FJC Self Sufficiency Coordinators pointed out, have been in crisis with abusive partners and may have other stressful issues that bear on a person's ability to be a responsible tenant.

Landlords have more discretion on credit and housing issues than they have on income. Project HOME could work with landlords to interpret a credit report or past housing court issue as something not of ongoing concern—for example, if the issue could fairly be attributed to the abusive relationship which the candidate has now moved beyond. It is in these areas where New Destiny's relationships with housing providers has make the difference between accepting an application or not. An FJC Self-Sufficiency Coordinator (interviewed in 2016 for the interim report) thought New Destiny's credibility with landlords could be very important in solving the housing problem for some DV clients. People who would otherwise qualify but have blemishes on their records—housing court judgments or bad credit, which some DV clients have—may be looked at more favorably by a landlord who trusts New Destiny.

While Project HOME can play a significant role in easing landlords' concerns about rent payment, housing court history, credit issues and abuser issues, it cannot do so without building and maintaining good relationships with landlords. Housing providers contacted for this evaluation addressed the value New Destiny brings in its system of screening and preparing and supporting clients. As one put it:

We want to make sure that the system they have, for us to be able to work with the clients they're referring, is robust. Screening, support, context – be sure individuals have greatest chances for success. I don't have those systems. I don't want a situation where they say, 'Here's a person, good luck,' and have it up to me to deal with problems. The more pre-counseling people have who are coming from abusive situations, the better. They are appreciative of the opportunity. We want them to be in the best position to succeed. The attractiveness of Project HOME is that their referrals come prescreened, have support, and so have less likelihood of becoming holdover or nonpayment issues. They are in best position to succeed because they have a support system.

Social service providers and landlords have very different perspectives. Social service providers are driven by the needs of their clients. Landlords must make projects work economically. Project HOME needed to bridge the gap between these two perspectives by educating each party about the views of the other. As New Destiny staff see it, only by recognizing the needs of the landlord could New Destiny succeed in pushing the boundaries for Tier II applicants.

Housing providers of the type New Destiny works with may not distinguish between New Destiny generally and Project HOME in particular. Another housing provider interviewed in 2016 said she had a very high opinion of New Destiny's competence and integrity going back several years, well before the inception of Project HOME. She found added value in the screening and other support Project HOME provides but did not see Project HOME as something separate from New Destiny, which had already made its reputation as a trusted partner. This housing provider noted the departure of the former Project HOME Director but felt she had already established a good and effective working relationship with the new Project HOME Director. Despite the

significant changes in Project HOME personnel in 2016 (the departures of the former Project HOME Director and Coordinator and appointment of the new Project HOME Director), landlords reported continued trusting relationships with Project HOME.

6. Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation has been guided by a Theory of Change for Project HOME elaborated at the outset of the project (outlined in the Appendix). The theory essentially describes the Project HOME rapid rehousing model by outlining the process steps and consequent expected outcomes of the project. These encompass outcomes on the housing “demand side” (i.e. making relationships with the FJCs and with survivors of domestic violence in need of housing) and on the “supply side” (i.e. making relationships with landlords that open up a supply of stable affordable housing units that FJC clients who meet eligibility criteria can access). Describing the Project HOME program model through the Theory of Change has been important for developing an evaluation framework that can draw out key lessons, a key objective of this pilot initiative.

Evaluation findings are based on document review and interviews conducted by ActKnowledge with a range of stakeholders. The latter include:

- Interviews with a sample of clients who have been housed (five housed clients agreed to be interviewed out of a total of 21 clients who had been placed by the end of July 2016) and with one client who had been through the process of referral and assistance by the Project but who had not yet obtained a place to live.
- Interviews with representatives of three landlords/housing providers: St. Nicks Alliance, Reliant Realty, and Arker Companies/Progressive Management.
- Meetings with Self-Sufficiency Coordinators/Program Coordinators in the FJCs in Manhattan, Brooklyn and the Bronx.
- Follow-up telephone interviews in 2017 with Program Coordinators at FJCs in the Bronx, Manhattan and Brooklyn. One person was interviewed in each borough, at two different points in time.
- Interviews with New Destiny staff, including the former Project HOME Director, who left in April 2016, the current Project HOME Director, appointed in May 2016, and the one-half time Project HOME Coordinator.
- The evaluators interviewed and had ongoing contact with other New Destiny personnel, including the Executive Director.

7. Conclusion

Project HOME proved to be a needed, cost-effective and sustainable resource for providing housing and housing information to domestic violence survivors. Retention has been 100 percent, with almost one-quarter in their homes for three years. HousingLink now places approximately 2.5 households per month. With changes to Project HOME to reach more people

with information, excellent use of staff resources, persistent follow-up, good screening and time to build relationships, Project HOME has become institutionalized as HousingLink—indicating that the pilot program merited continuation. Challenges and revisions were part of the learning process, until the system could be institutionalized and sustained. With costs to house a family in shelter at \$62,000+ per year (based on FY 2017 Mayor’s Management Report), the costs of Project HOME, and now HousingLink, are a tiny fraction of that (the cost of two staff persons is the major expense).

Although housing is often one of the greatest needs of domestic violence survivors, housing referral is not a service FJCs typically provide. The permanent scarcity of affordable housing in New York City makes it a “seller’s market” wherein people with histories of domestic violence or homelessness are at a competitive disadvantage in finding housing. They can face discrimination, rents are high, and landlords can be opaque in their tenant selection process. As one program coordinator noted, “...clients are going through so many barriers—counseling, children in counseling or not, conflict in shelter—so much is going on for our clients, they may not follow up” on an apartment lead. Project HOME through its various activities worked to fill in the gaps and help clients follow up on the available opportunities to secure safe housing, whether through Project HOME’s landlords or independently. As another Coordinator said, “...the thing that’s so important about this program [Project HOME] is it’s the only housing program we can refer to that will take clients through the process of placing them into an apartment.”

New York City has provided a variety of rental subsidy programs under Mayor de Blasio, but, as one coordinator explained, it remains difficult for survivors to locate safe affordable housing on their own:

Sometimes the vouchers haven’t been enough (now the vouchers are going up, increasing according to family composition.) Say their voucher is only \$900 but the rent is \$1,400 and they have a part time job, or they’re on public assistance. Leaves them in a situation where they’re going to fall behind on the rent anyway. Realistically speaking even though they get into apartment they can’t keep up with the rent.

[Without Project HOME,] say you get a voucher, now you’re looking for an apartment on your own. Some clients--especially in the Bronx, a lot of people are Spanish-speaking--have low literacy levels. *Even I* would be stressed if I have to start looking for apartment tomorrow! For clients without my skills, who have language barriers, it’s really stressful! Some pay a real estate agency with money they needed for first month’s security or for furniture. Often the money for the agent is money they had to borrow. So they get the apartment, now they have to pay the friend back. Meeting with the landlord, speaking with the landlord—many landlords don’t want to take vouchers. They might illegally discriminate against our clients. They’ll give excuses; they wouldn’t say they are not taking them because of the voucher, because that’s illegal. What landlords don’t realize is that the client will use the five years the voucher covers to go to school, get

qualified, have a job so they can keep the apartment... Working with Project HOME clients don't have that challenge.

Clients accepted into Project HOME don't have that challenge because Project HOME does the work of identifying safe, suitable apartments offered by trustworthy landlords. Project HOME makes sure that any candidate referred for housing can afford the rent burden and other living costs. Clients are also screened for other issues of concern to landlords, especially housing court involvement and credit problems. Project HOME will not refer candidates whose issues will make them unacceptable to landlords unless Project HOME staff feels they can explain to the landlord why the applicant's history will not predict future problems. Project HOME assists the applicants in assembling the required up-to-date documentation, completing the application, and presenting well in interviews with prospective landlords. These services are all of great value to domestic violence survivors seeking housing. They are also part of what landlords find attractive about working with Project HOME, the knowledge that Project HOME referrals are carefully vetted and supported and provided with appropriate services as necessary to be successful tenants.

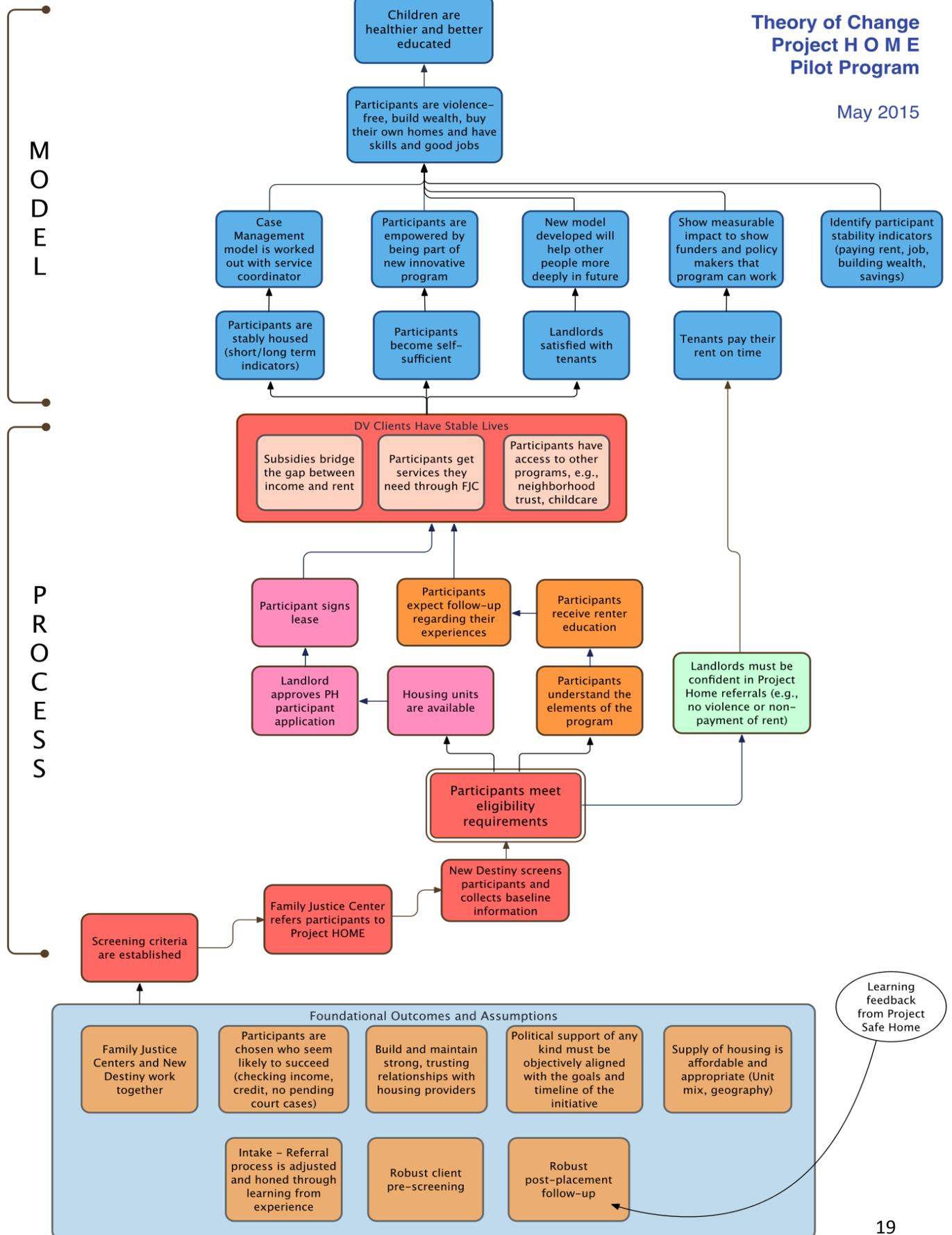
Project HOME has become institutionalized as HousingLink, at a sustainable cost and a streamlined system that can serve domestic violence survivors who are eligible for HousingLink apartments and develop a plan with those who are not. Continued and expanded funding for the staff is necessary for sustainability, but the costs for rehousing one family are a tiny fraction of the \$62,000+ cost of housing a family in shelter.

HousingLink has proved, during its development phase as Project HOME, to work, providing housing for an unserved population. We strongly hope that HousingLink continues to be supported and housed in New Destiny Housing Corporation, which has demonstrated high levels of both capacity and flexibility.

Appendix: Project HOME Theory of Change

Theory of Change Project H O M E Pilot Program

May 2015



The Theory of Change depicts the Project HOME model as well as the referral-intake-placement process for DV clients. The Theory is a work in progress and should be revisited now after so much experience with the pilot program.

Foundational outcomes and assumptions going into Project HOME appear at the bottom row. The steps of the process appear above the bottom row, from screening criteria to DV clients placed and leading stable lives. Once it reaches “Participants meet eligibility requirements,” the process divides into two separately colored pathways:

 a pathway on making housing units available

 a pathway on client preparation to become tenants

The green box  refers to landlords trusting / accepting PH referrals.

These pathways lead to the group outcome, “DV clients have stable lives,” which completes the process part of the ToC diagram.

The outcomes in blue represent a Theory of Change of the Project HOME model and of the relationship between the present 40-tenant pilot program as a promising practice and a wider application of the model to DV work in New York and possibly elsewhere.

Source Material

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