

Staying Home?

Examining longer-term housing outcomes of the Private Rental Access Program (PRAP)

Executive Summary

The Private Rental Access Program (PRAP) supports households in housing crisis to secure or maintain private rental housing. The decline in social housing stock has put pressure on the private rental market to accommodate low-income households. Despite increasing policy attention and expenditure on private rental programs little is known about their efficacy in the short or longer term.

This executive summary outlines the key findings and recommendations from the evaluation of Unison's PRAP. It draws on 83 survey responses from households that were assisted by Unison in 2017, as well as administrative and focus group data to answer the following four questions:

- 1 What are the characteristics of households that use the PRAP, and what assistance do they receive?
- 2 What are the longer-term housing outcomes?
- 3 How satisfied are people with the assistance they received from the PRAP?
- 4 And, how satisfied are they with their housing?

Key findings

Who uses PRAP

- Most households are paying rent in private rental (60%) when they seek assistance, but a significant minority are in extremely precarious housing or are homeless.
- **The PRAP primarily works with families** (73%) and single parent families account for the largest household group (43%), with nearly all of these families headed by women (90%).
- Just over half of the PRAP servicer users were unemployed (51%), with another quarter (27%) outside the labour force. About one in five reported they were working when they first presented.
- The evaluation found that the PRAP is targeting the 'right' group - there are very low rates across a range of measures that are indicative of complexity, while across general measures of disadvantage rates are much higher.



73% of PRAP users are families, with 43% of them single parent households.

What sort of assistance do they get

- **Most households (82%) that use the PRAP require only a single support period**, and most (70%) are supported for a relatively short amount of time, between 1-5 days.
- Although individual support periods of 21 days or longer are relatively rare, representing 1 in 10 of all support periods, when combined they account for 58% of all support days provided by the PRAP. This tells us that a relatively small number of households require considerable assistance to maintain or secure private rental.
- Three quarters (73%) of all brokerage funding was spent on establishing tenancies, with maintaining housing accounting for just over a quarter (26%).
- The average spend to establish housing is more expensive than maintaining housing (\$1,417 versus \$1,248), but it is also more resource intensive, taking on average 50% more support days to establish a tenancy than it does to maintain a tenancy (6.6 versus 4.2 days).



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Housing outcomes

- **The PRAP delivers sustainable housing outcomes.** Based on our analysis of survey responses and taking possible sample selection bias into account we estimate that approximately 8 in 10 households that use the PRAP maintain their housing and avoid homelessness. A substantial majority remain in the housing for which they receive support and most move on with their lives with no further need of assistance.
- The PRAP works effectively with low-need homeless households. The survey found that 18 households were homeless when they presented to the PRAP. Two years later 15 were housed and most (n=10) were still in the same properties that the PRAP service had assisted them to secure. The other five had moved, but all were in private rental, had a lease and were paying rent.



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Satisfaction

- **People were satisfied with the services they received from the PRAP.** Financial support was especially highly regarded with 86% of respondents stating they were satisfied or very satisfied with the financial support offered. There were similarly high levels of satisfaction with the advocacy support provided by the PRAP (82%).



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- **People were satisfied with the size and location of their housing.** The survey found that 4 in every 5 households (82%) were satisfied or very satisfied with the size of their housing, and similarly high levels of satisfaction were reported for the location and neighbourhood.
- The level of **satisfaction with the condition of their housing was markedly lower** - just under two thirds (64%) were satisfied or very satisfied with the condition of their housing. The result, while still strong, draws attention to poor housing conditions at the lower end of the rental market.

Some challenges

The success of the program is in part derived from having a clearly identified target group: low-need, low-income households. There is a danger of increased pressure on the PRAP to broaden its access to more complex service users for whom there are very few private rental or other housing options. This could also increase the risk of tenancy breakdowns occurring more frequently and in turn compromise relationships with real estate agents, ultimately resulting in reduced access to affordable private rental properties.

Resisting this pressure is challenging as the PRAP is delivered in a context where access to resources is often prioritised for those deemed in 'greatest need'. Policy makers and indeed services must ensure programs exist for those who require a 'lighter touch' to assist them through a crisis, after which they typically move on with their lives.

Recommendations



1 Design a Program Logic Model

Our analysis reveals that the Unison PRAP undertakes many duties to support people in housing crisis. Currently, however, there is no documentation of the model used to validate and guide this support. **We recommend the PRAP generates a model of practice based on a program logic model.** Program logic models provide a method for explaining how services are delivered through schematic or graphic representations (Unrau, 1993). The PRAP model should incorporate the findings from this report with practice experience to produce a program logic model that illustrates the possible pathways for households from their first presentation to the PRAP to exiting the program. The development of a program logic model for the PRAP would serve two purposes. First, it would clarify the aims of the PRAP and the methods through which these aims are achieved. Second, the model would capture the detail of the work being undertaken by the PRAP and articulate key outcome measures.

2 Remove the Centrepay administrative fee

Centrepay is an automated system for the transferral of rental payments. This service assists households with management of rental payments and can prevent problems occurring due to rental arrears. Centrepay has an annual fee of \$26 that is paid by the landlord. The fee deters some landlords from taking up Centrepay. **We recommend the government remove the Centrepay administrative fee.**

3 Identify the service user population and maintain focus on this

Our analysis reveals that the Unison PRAP mostly works with low-income households that experience associated disadvantage such as housing affordability, financial difficulties and eviction. Measures of complexity such as alcohol and other drug misuse and mental health problems are substantially lower than for those attending the Unison IAP. **We recommend the PRAP clearly identifies appropriate service users to ensure that the services it provides are targeted and suitable.** In the current housing context, resources are understandably directed to households in greatest need. However, there are very few sustainable private rental options for people with high levels of complexity. There is also the risk of damaging relationships with real estate agents if tenancies fail. The PRAP has been successful in providing intensive short-term support to assist households with a housing crisis, after which the household is able to manage its circumstances. It needs to maintain this focus.

4 Employ specialist workers

A key finding of the evaluation is the benefit brought to the PRAP through the employment of workers with previous experience working in private rental management. Advocacy with property managers and landlords is a crucial task undertaken by the PRAP workers; therefore, **we recommend the continued employment of workers with specialist knowledge of the private rental sector.** Such workers are a bridge between real estate agents and tenants; and these relationships are central to providing effective advocacy. This involves regular engagement with local property managers to deliver better results for tenants and real estate agencies including better matching of properties and improved understanding of how the PRAP can assist both parties to achieve successful rental outcomes.