

# Step-Down Pilot Project

## *Evaluation Summary*

Author: Kristin Dillon, Wilder Research and Paul Carlson, Hearth Connection

JANUARY 2019





Hearth Connection's Step-Down Pilot Project **offers a pathway** for individuals in supportive housing sites who are stable enough to no longer need intensive support services, but need some assistance **to achieve full independence in their own housing.**

## Resident experiences and outcomes associated with Step-Down

### Resident experiences



#### Stable and safe

Most residents at both baseline and follow-up felt that their housing was stable and safe, including a level of security they have not experienced for a long time.



#### Positive about support

Residents were extremely positive about the support they have received from Step-Down, especially the accessibility and care from their case manager and the rental subsidy.



#### Satisfied with Step-Down

All residents were satisfied with Step-Down and would recommend it to others.

### Resident outcomes



#### Sense of control and freedom

Residents have a greater sense of control and freedom in their lives after moving into their Step-Down apartment, which has led to greater responsibility in other areas of their lives as well.



#### Relationships and social connectedness

Residents also identified an improved sense of social connectedness and improved relationships after moving into their Step-Down housing.



#### Physical and mental health improvements

Several residents identified improvements in their physical and mental health associated with their new living situation.

### Supportive housing system outcomes



#### Aligning the intensity of support with individuals' needs

In addition to outcomes for the residents enrolled in Step-Down, supportive housing site staff also identified that the project helps shift resources across the region's homelessness response system to better align the intensity of support with individuals' needs.

### Step-Down Pilot Project

The Step-Down Pilot Project, created by Hearth Connection, oversees a household's transition from a site-based permanent supportive housing program to a less intensive scattered-site option with voluntary services. Many recognize that households in supportive housing sites stabilize over time and do not need the full array of services provided onsite. Step-Down offers an exit for stable households and creates a new spot in supportive housing for households just leaving homelessness and in need of a higher level of services. Please see the end of this report for more information about Hearth Connection and the Step-Down evaluation.



## Resident experiences

All residents were satisfied with the Step-Down project and would recommend it to others.

All of the residents shared positive views of the project and how it has affected their lives. Many residents called Step-Down “a blessing” or “life-changing” and shared that they felt “lucky” to participate in it.

*“Because it’s life-changing. It gives you security, stability. A chance to start over. It gives you a chance to re-start with a community, start to be an upstanding citizen and contribute to a community.”*

*“It’s an awesome program. It gives you a chance. They help you help yourself. I would recommend this program.”*

*“I think that’s the one thing I appreciate about Step-Down the most, is that they genuinely care about their clients. They don’t treat people like a product or a number. They really care about the welfare and well-being of their clients.”*

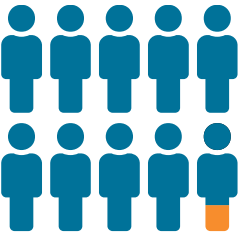
*“I feel more independent now, I feel more alive, instead of surviving. I feel like I’m living now rather than just surviving. Every day there was survival.”*

Would you recommend Step-Down to others?



**100% “yes”**  
at baseline & follow-up

How satisfied are you with Step-Down?



**100%** at baseline  
**“very satisfied”**  
**95%** at follow-up  
5% said **somewhat satisfied**

## Residents were extremely positive about the support they received while in the project.

In particular, they appreciated that their *case manager* was accessible, supportive, helpful, knowledgeable, and willing to advocate for them.

*“She’s always on her job. She’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me. She’s always ready to help. She knows how to deal with people. She’s always there, with anything I needed.”*

*“My [Step-Down] worker. I don’t need any other kind of worker, as long as I have her. I would call her about anything. She’s always there.”*

*“She was very helpful. She really cares. Not too many case managers care like that. She’ll call me, just to check up on me, see how I’m doing.”*

Residents felt the financial assistance or *rental subsidy* were essential for them accessing and maintaining their housing

*“Step-Down helped me to be able to get this apartment, rent-wise. I wouldn’t be able to pay for it without them.”*



Several people appreciated having some *choice* in where they live or their housing.

*“You get to pick to the [apartment] you like the best. That’s the best part.”*

*“I like the apartment. I like the layout of the apartment, and I did my thing with the apartment. I can sit and look at that window. It’s just good amenities. I love it actually.”*

Most residents did not have *suggestions for improvement*, but those who did would like additional supports, such as different or improved housing or landlords – particularly if they have barriers to housing like a criminal record, need assistance with transportation, or require additional mental health support.

# Most respondents at both baseline and follow-up felt that their housing was stable and safe.

Nearly all residents shared that they have more **stability** in their current housing than they have had for a long time.

*“Because I have the comfort of knowing I can make rent. For the first time, I’ve had this stability.”*

Most also described a general feeling of **safety** in their apartments, often mentioning measures in place to increase safety, such as multiple locks, security doors, or security staff.

*“The whole apartment makes me feel safe. You got the security door out there, you gotta have a special key to get in, a key for the mailbox, all that.”*

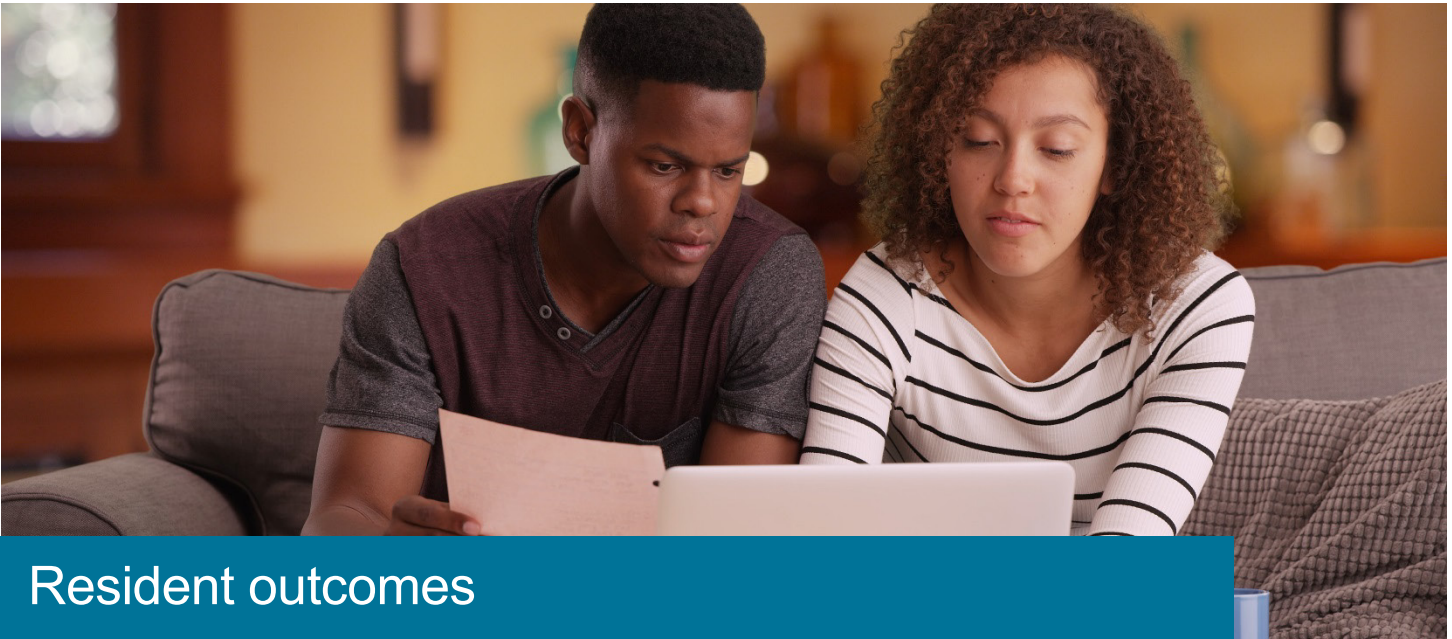
Many felt their housing **location** is an asset, particularly because it is “nice,” quiet, well-maintained, or accessible to transportation and amenities. This was especially important because several respondents had limited access to their own transportation.

*“The block is very quiet. I feel really safe. It’s just a very good block. The building is very quiet, clean.”*  
*“I like this location. It’s close to the bus lines, close to Cub, shopping, McDonalds, Walgreens.”*

However, some residents have had difficulty with landlords and housing maintenance and a couple have experienced or were aware of crimes happening around their home.

## Residents’ Opinions of Housing





## Resident outcomes

### Residents shared that they have a greater sense of control and freedom in their lives.

Some shared that the program helped them increase their **responsibility** and independence more broadly, including staying on top of bills and motivation to follow rules.

*“Actually, my goal, when I first moved here, I wanted a job. Since I moved here, I’ve got three jobs. Then by my birthday, I wanted a car, so I’m finishing that last payment this week. Two of my main goals are accomplished.”*

*“Because I have a full time job, and I’m able to pay my rent, pay all my bills. I’m stable.”*

In the most recent assessment on the Arizona Self-Sufficiency Matrix, all residents had stable **access to food** and ways to prepare it, which is an improvement for 44 percent of residents. Similarly, 81 percent had **sufficient income** to meet their basic needs, including any subsidies; this also represents an improvement for 44 percent of residents.

### Residents also identified positive changes in their social connectedness after enrolling in the program.

Residents identified they were able to build their **relationship skills**, including reaching out for help and improving their communication and conflict resolution skills after moving into their Step-Down apartments and working with their case manager.

*“I’m not a person that asks for help real quick, and this program helped taught me how to let someone help me. I try to do things on my own, and I’m learning, it’s okay to ask for help.”*

*“The main reason it changed was it made me learn how to reach out and talk to my landlord about things that need to be done. If [Step-Down case manager] wasn’t there, I don’t think I would be here right now. I learned from her, that I should be peaceful when I talk with them. She helped me be more patient.”*

Some residents also identified that the project helped them **improve their relationships** with family and friends, including reconnecting with people they had lost touch with and forming new relationships.

*“Since I moved in, my daughter found me after 20 years, and we’ve got a relationship. I have a relationship with my granddaughter...Step-Down helped me reconnect with the world. It’s the best way I can think about it. I was shut off, just worked on myself while I was at [supportive housing]. Now I can work on relationships since I’ve been here.”*

*“My interaction in the community, I have a heightened occurrence of that. I didn’t get around very much before. I have a large group of friends from lots of different walks of life. I interact with other people a lot more. Rather than being more alone and isolated. That’s been a big plus.”*

In addition, about 40 percent of residents had an improvement in their **community involvement** (44%) and **family or social relationships** (35%) in the most recent assessment of the Arizona Self-Sufficiency Matrix.

## Residents felt their housing has helped them improve their health.

Many residents also identified positive changes to their **physical health**, such as maintaining sobriety, monitoring blood pressure, maintaining medication compliance, eating better, or generally focusing on their health more.

*“I’m taking my health seriously now, making sure I’m taking my medications, trying to quit smoking.”*

*“I’m losing weight now. I’m able to eat better now. I actually have a fridge and a stove and a microwave. It’s easier to cook food. I’m able to eat better. It’s easier to lose weight now. Which makes it better on my back. I have chronic back pain. Right now I have no pain. For the longest time, there was no relief in pain. But now it’s gotten better.”*

Some residents shared that their housing helped their **mental health** by feeling less stressed, worried, and depressed.

*“[Step-Down case manager] gave me a referral to a mental health therapist, which is something I’m really grateful for.”*

*“I am less depressed. I’ve battled depression or a very long time and now I’m less stressed, calmer, and more focused.”*

Based on the Arizona Self-Sufficiency Matrix, 81 percent of residents had **health care coverage** at their most recent assessment. This represents an improvement for over half of residents (52%) and stable coverage for 30 percent.



## Supportive housing system outcomes

While the main purpose of the Step-Down project is to support and improve the lives of residents, the secondary benefits are for the overall homelessness response system in the region. Because of this, we also gathered feedback from referring supportive housing site staff about their experience with the project.

### Referring supportive housing sites saw benefits of Step-Down across the full homelessness response system in the region.

- Sites identified that the project offers affordable housing for people who need it and are ready for it, which is very important in our tight housing market.
- The project supports residents in finding housing options and overcoming housing barriers, such as criminal backgrounds or challenging rental histories.
- In addition, the project opens up spaces in the supportive housing sites for other people who need the higher intensity supports.
- Sites identified it has been easy to fill in their open spots in their programs due to waiting lists and coordinated entry systems in their counties. Many identified that there is a great deal of need in the community for supportive housing services.

*“So it’s a really nice way for the continuum of care using that model. We move people out successfully and move people in who really need services.”*

## Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, this evaluation demonstrates that the Step-Down Pilot Project was successful at helping participants access and maintain more independent living with fewer support services than in their previous supportive housing site. The evaluation identified three key recommendations for future efforts in this field:

- Given the high level of satisfaction and success among participants, and the identification of many more potential participants by supportive housing site staff, there is an interest and need to expand or replicate the Step-Down project. In order to assist with an expansion or replication, Hearth Connection has created an instructional guide on how to replicate the Step-Down Pilot Project, largely based on the evaluation data and program records.
- Several participants identified that they relied on the guidance and support from the case manager to help them build their independent living skills, including working with landlords and maintaining their apartments. Building independent living skills was not intended to be a core component of the project, but it is a clear need for many individuals, so it should be built in explicitly either in the supportive housing site or during the recruitment process for the project in order to maximize opportunities for success.
- Some participants who were referred to the project either chose not to participate or were unable to be housed and a couple of participants who were housed required a higher degree of support than intended in this model. It is important to position this type of project as a step in a broader continuum of services and potentially allow participants to move in either direction along the continuum as their support needs emerge and evolve. It is necessary to have cooperation in order to integrate services – the supportive housing sites, coordinated entry, mobile teams, support services, and subsidies need to align.

## Evaluation

In order to evaluate the processes and outcomes associated with the Step-Down project, Hearth Connection partnered with Wilder Research. To learn about their experiences with the project, Wilder Research conducted baseline interviews with 20 program participants approximately three months after transitioning into their Step-Down housing and follow-up interviews with 19 of these participants in August and September 2018, at which time they had been housed for between 9 and 19 months (Average = 16 months). In addition, Hearth Connection provided participant results from the Arizona Self-Sufficiency Matrix, which assesses participants' ability to meet goals across 18 domains and the level of support required to do so. Finally, Wilder conducted interviews with staff from referring supportive housing sites to better understand the referral and placement process, as well as the impact of the project on supportive housing sites.

## Hearth Connection

Hearth Connection believes that everyone deserves a home. They help people whose circumstances have caused them to experience long-term homelessness. Hearth Connection works as an intermediary, allowing them to be the bridge between federal, state and county arenas, local community agencies and other stakeholders to test new ideas and target resources towards identified service gaps across Minnesota. They work within 46 counties across four large regions in Minnesota, and this unique position allows the creation, execution and evaluation of new ways to address how Minnesota is working to end homelessness.



## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank staff from Hearth Connection and Avivo who were instrumental in conducting this evaluation. We would especially like to thank Lorraine Luger from Avivo and Heather Duchscherer from Hearth Connection.

We would also like to thank the Wilder Research staff who contributed to this study and report, including:

- |                   |                   |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| – Sheila Bell     | – Nora Johnson    |
| – Jennifer Bohlke | – Jessica Pham    |
| – Jackie Campeau  | – Melissa Serafin |
| – Rachel Fields   | – Dan Swanson     |

Finally, we would like thank the individuals who took part in the evaluation, including the program participants and supportive housing site staff. We deeply appreciate them sharing their voices with us.

Wilder Research, a division of Amherst H. Wilder Foundation, is a nationally respected nonprofit research and evaluation group. For more than 100 years, Wilder Research has gathered and interpreted facts and trends to help families and communities thrive, get at the core of community concerns, and uncover issues that are overlooked or poorly understood.

451 Lexington Parkway North  
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55104  
651-280-2700 | [www.wilderresearch.org](http://www.wilderresearch.org)

**Wilder Research®**

Information. Insight. Impact.

