Austin

MEMORANDUM

To: Mayor and City Council

Through: Stephanie Hayden-Howard, LMSW, Assistant City Manager SHH

From: David Gray, Austin Homeless Strategies and Operations Director DG

Date: November 20, 2026

Subject: **Homelessness Diversion Pilot Program Evaluation**

This memorandum summarizes findings from a research update regarding the Austin Homeless Strategies & Operations (HSO) Homeless Diversion Demonstration Project. HSO commissioned a three-year study by the University of Texas at Austin School of Nursing to assess the demonstration project's effectiveness. The project is administered as part of the Sunrise Navigation Center's Wayfinder Program, which is a homelessness diversion program designed to quickly assist households at-risk of homelessness or recently experiencing homelessness by providing crisis housing coaching and limited direct financial assistance to clients to secure housing.

This University of Texas at Austin report measures program data from November 1, 2024, through July 30, 2026. Here are some key characteristics of the participants during the reporting period:

- 336 households (containing 815 people) were served, averaging 16 households per month.
- 71 percent of the heads of households were female.
- 51 percent of households served were families with at least one child under the age of 18.

The primary findings of this update include the following:

- 87.4% of program participants were identified for enrollment within 30 days of their eviction or homelessness start date. Of this total (n=333), 58% secured new housing through project assistance within 30 days of their eviction or date of homelessness start.
- 83.6% of households receiving Wayfinder services secured permanent housing, 4.2% secured temporary housing destinations, 11.3% exited to unknown destinations, and 0.9% exited to homelessness.
- The average amount of money disbursed per household was $1,101.
- 90% of households remained housed during the first six months of receiving services.

This report highlights many of the promising aspects of the Homeless Diversion Demonstration Project and future opportunities for research into homelessness response programs. HSO intends

to incorporate the final recommendation into a future homelessness diversion solicitation, which will be scheduled if funding is available.

Should you have any questions or concerns, please contact David Gray, Director of Austin Homeless Strategies and Operations, at David.Gray@austintexas.gov.

cc: T.C. Broadnax, City Manager
Erika Brady, City Clerk
Jason Hadavi, City Auditor
Mary Jane Grubb, Municipal Court Clerk
Judge Sherry Statman, Municipal Court
CMO Executive Team
Department Directors

Attachment: Wayfinder Program Quarterly Report #5

Work Order No. 2024-01-UT-HSO
Under Master Agreement No. UTA19-000382
An Evaluation of a Pilot Homelessness Diversion Program in Austin, TX
Homeless Strategy Office and The UT School of Nursing

Wayfinder Program Quarterly Report
October 15, 2026

Submitted by
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Shayna Dunitz

Report Overview

This quarterly report summarizes client enrollments using City of Austin Diversion funds into the Wayfinder Program at Sunrise Homeless Navigation Center between November 1, 2024, and July 30, 2026.[1] We also report on the demographic make-up of clients served, how quickly clients move into housing, funding trends, and housing exit destinations.

Project Background

In 2022, Sunrise Homeless Navigation Center ("Sunrise") established the Wayfinder Program with private funding to quickly assist people on the verge of homelessness or recently experiencing homelessness. This program provides financial assistance to clients for housing costs (such as deposits, first month's rent, late rent) regardless of the date of homelessness onset.

In November 2024, Sunrise was awarded a contract from Austin Homeless Strategies and Operations (AHSO) to implement a pilot homelessness diversion program. The objective is to help households avoid homelessness, or, if they've already been homeless for more than 30 days, exit it quickly, using minimal to no financial assistance.

Primary Outcomes

The primary outcomes of this evaluation are:

- Number of Wayfinder clients that exit homelessness within 30 days of homelessness onset
- Percent of Wayfinder clients that exit to permanent housing, and percent who do not return to homelessness within 6 months

Methodology

This report uses data provided via the Sunrise Wayfinder tracker and from the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) that is managed by the Ending Community Homelessness Coalition (ECHO). The data were filtered to include Wayfinder program enrollments whose funding source was coded as City of Austin Diversion. The analysis in this report relies on Sunrise and HMIS data and is for the November 1, 2024 to July 30, 2026 time period. Please note the following exceptions:

- For 21 households enrolled between January and July 2026, Sunrise records could not be matched to an HMIS record; these 21 households (~6% of total households) are excluded from all HMIS-based demographic breakdowns (age, race, disability, veteran status, gender) but are included in all other statistics.
- Gender was inadvertently not included in the HMIS extract covering the January – July 2026 period that was provided by ECHO. Therefore, the gender breakdown in this report reflects only the November 2024 – December 2025 period (281 households)
- Funding figures reflect total City of Austin dollars disbursed to each household, combining amounts recorded under Diversion, Rapid Exit, and Travel cost fields, since some Diversion-coded enrollments had their disbursement recorded under one of those other fields. A portion of households (101 of 336) have no dollar amount recorded under any of these fields; these are included as $0 in all averages, consistent with how total program spending is calculated.

[1] We received data from ECHO up to July 30, 2026, not July 31, 2026.

Findings

Program Features

Between November 1, 2024, and July 30, 2026, the Wayfinder Program served 336 households (815 people total) with City of Austin Diversion funding, averaging about 16 households (39 people) per month. Figure 1a. below provides the time trend of enrollments. August 2025 had the highest number of households and people enrolled during the reporting time period.

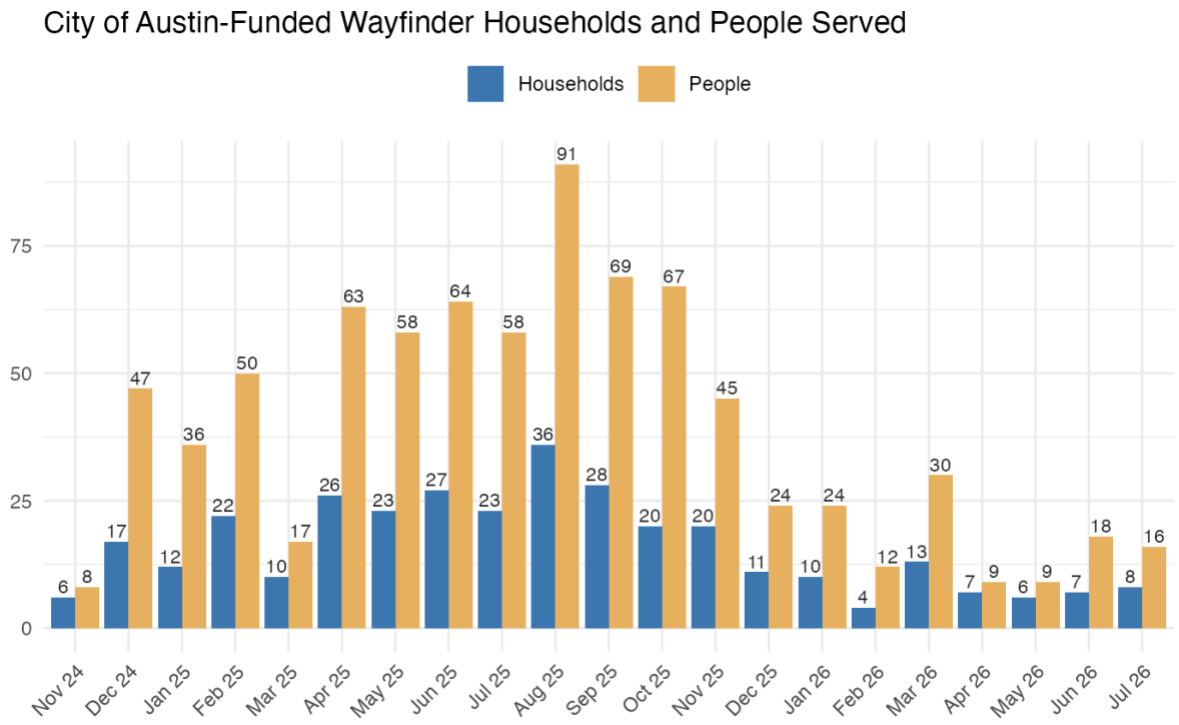


Figure 1a

Figure 1b. shows the amount of money that the Wayfinder Program disbursed to households, combining Diversion, Rapid Exit, and Diversion Travel costs. The average amount disbursed to households in this time period was $1,100.90, for a total of $369,901.50

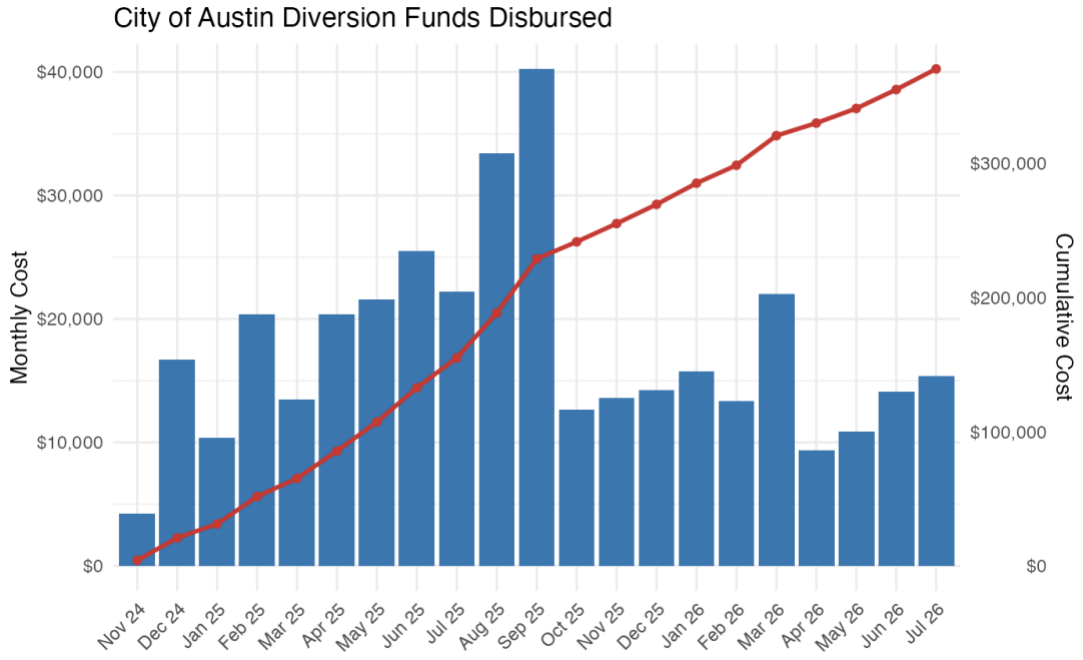


Figure 1b

The Wayfinder Program serves clients experiencing different forms of homelessness (i.e., HUD-defined homelessness categories), including those who are literally homeless (Category 1), at risk of homelessness (Category 2), and fleeing domestic violence (Category 4). Figure 2 shows that people who are at imminent risk of homelessness are the largest group served by the program, followed closely by those who are literally homeless. Additionally, about 1 in 8 heads of household are fleeing domestic violence.

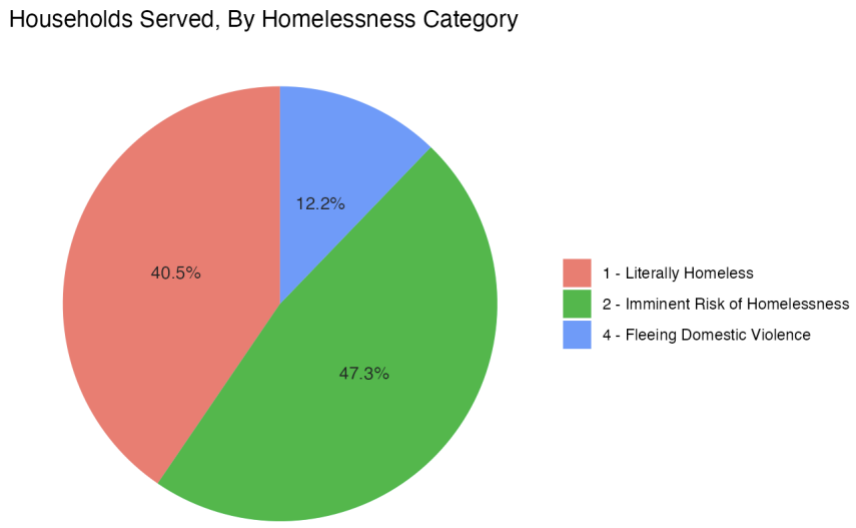


Figure 2

A large majority of households (more than 86%) were enrolled in the Wayfinder program within 30 days of either their eviction or homelessness start (see Table 1).

Enrollment in Program Within 30 Days		
Enrolled In < 30 Days	n	Percent
No	42	12.6%
Yes	291	87.4%
Total	333	100.0%

Table 1

Demographic Information

In the figures and table on the next 2 pages, we look at the demographic makeup of program participants. The main takeaways from this analysis are as follows:

- Figure 3 shows the age distribution of Wayfinder Program heads of household. The distribution highlights that more than half of heads of household are 45 and under. The average age is 41.
- Figure 4 shows the racial and ethnic makeup of Wayfinder clients. Almost half of clients identify as non-Hispanic Black, about 22% identify as Hispanic (any race), and another 20.6% identify as non-Hispanic White.
- Figure 5 shows that females constitute a majority (71%) of Wayfinder heads of household.[2]
- Figure 6 shows the distribution of household size among Wayfinder clients. About 41% are single person households. Approximately 1 in 5 are in households with 2 members, and the remaining households (about 40%) have 3 or more members in them.
- Just over half (51.3%; n=161) were families with at least one child under the age of 18 (see Table 2).
- Additional analysis reveals that about 3% of clients are veterans, and 62% of clients have at least one disability.

[2] We did not receive gender information for the January-July 2026 data in time for this report. We will provide an update in the next report.

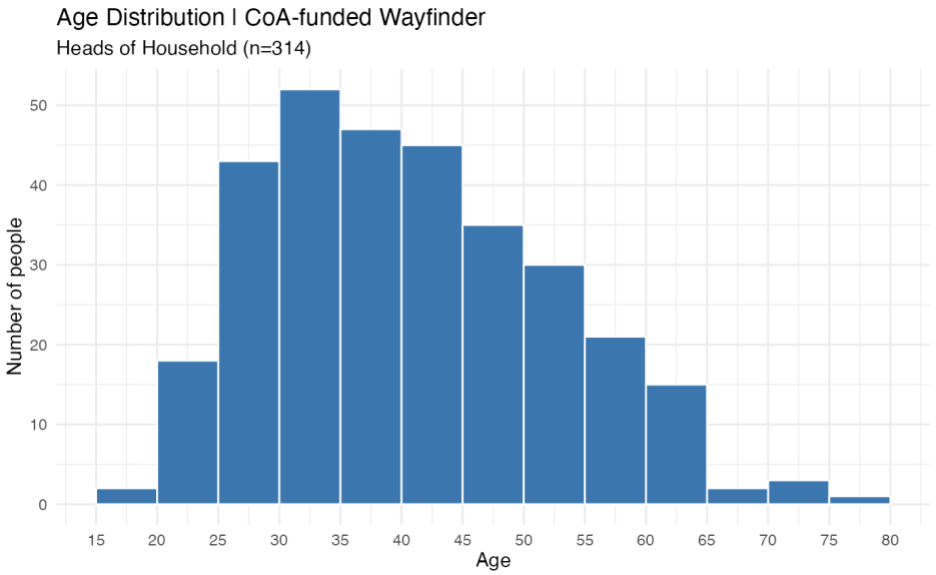


Figure 3

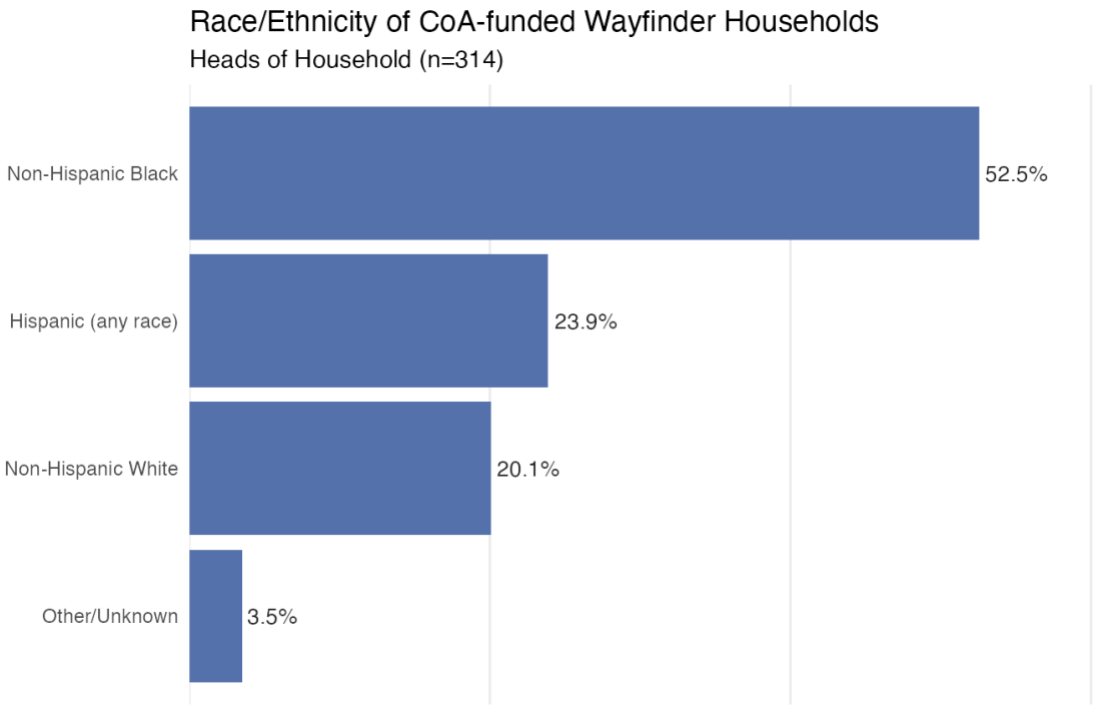


Figure 4

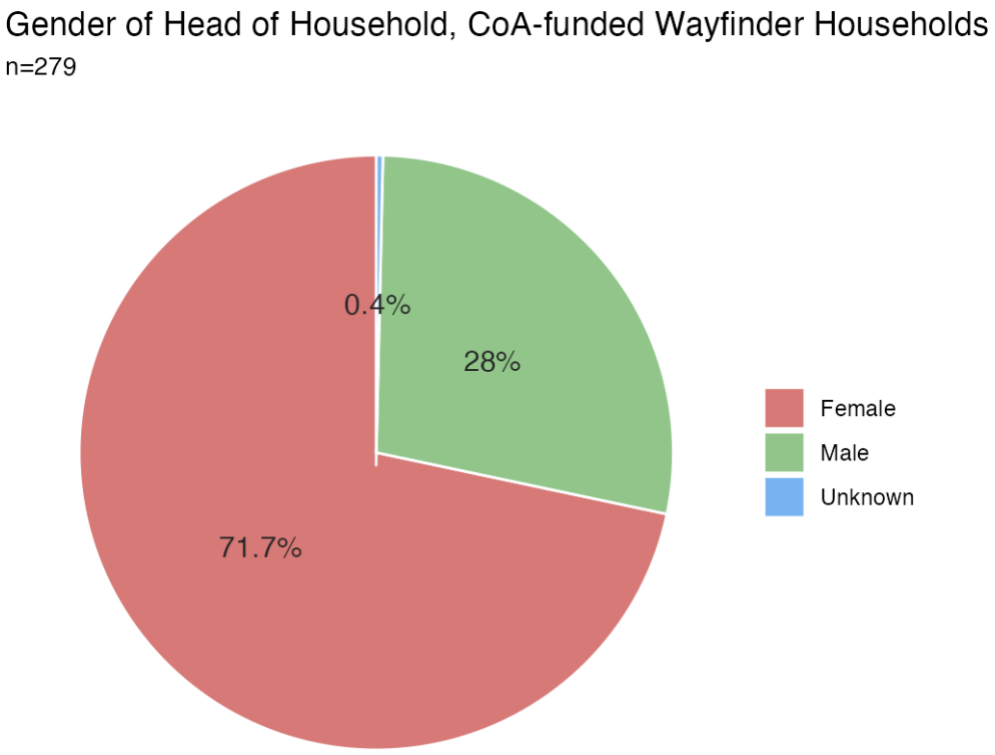


Figure 5

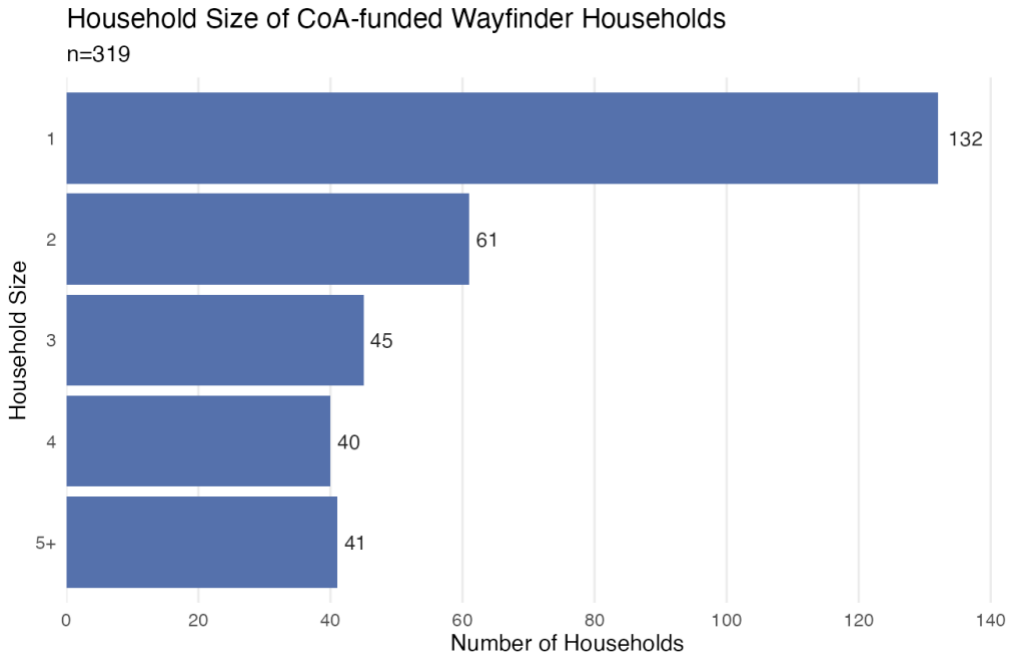


Figure 6

Presence of Kids in Household n=314		
Household Type	n	Percent
With kids	161	51.3%
Without kids	153	48.7%
Total	314	100.0%

Table 2

Program Outcomes

The findings in this section focus on four main aspects, 1) how quickly households move into housing, 2) what type of housing they move into when they exit the program, 3) how much money is disbursed to households based on different characteristics, and 4) factors associated with a positive housing outcome (i.e., moving to permanent housing).

1. Time to Move In

More than half (58%) of Wayfinder program clients moved into housing within 30 days of either a) date of imminent eviction or b) date of last episode of homelessness (see Table 3).

In addition to focusing on how quickly clients move into housing after eviction or the start of their homelessness, we also examined how quickly clients moved into housing after enrolling in the Wayfinder program. Figure 7 below shows that more than 4 in 5 households in this time period move into housing within a month of enrolling in the program. Only about 3% of clients move into housing more than 3 months after enrolling in the program.

Moved Into Housing Within 30 Days of Eviction or Homelessness n=333		
Moved In < 30 Days	n	Percent
No	140	42.0%
Yes	193	58.0%
Total	333	100.0%

Table 3

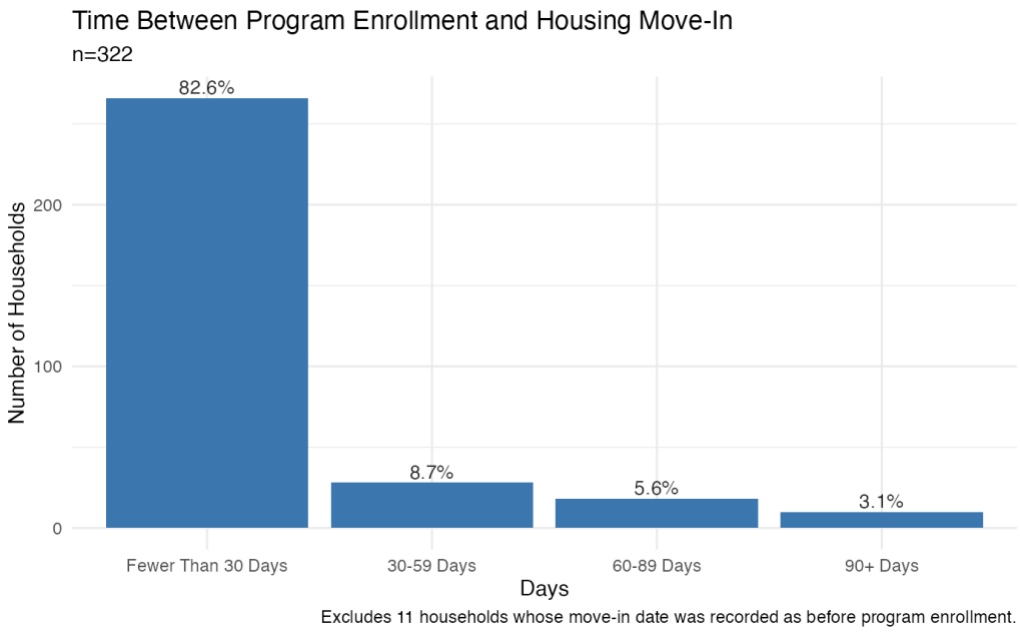


Figure 7

2. Exit Destination

Figure 8 shows the distribution of exit destinations for Wayfinder clients. The analysis is of the most recent exit destination in HMIS for a client, as of July 30, 2026. Therefore, even if someone exits the Wayfinder program to, say, a permanent housing destination (e.g., a free-market rental), then re-enrolls in a homeless services program and then exits to a temporary situation (e.g., staying temporarily with friends), that client would be counted in the Temporary Housing bar below. More than 83% of Wayfinder clients' most recent exit was to a permanent housing destination.

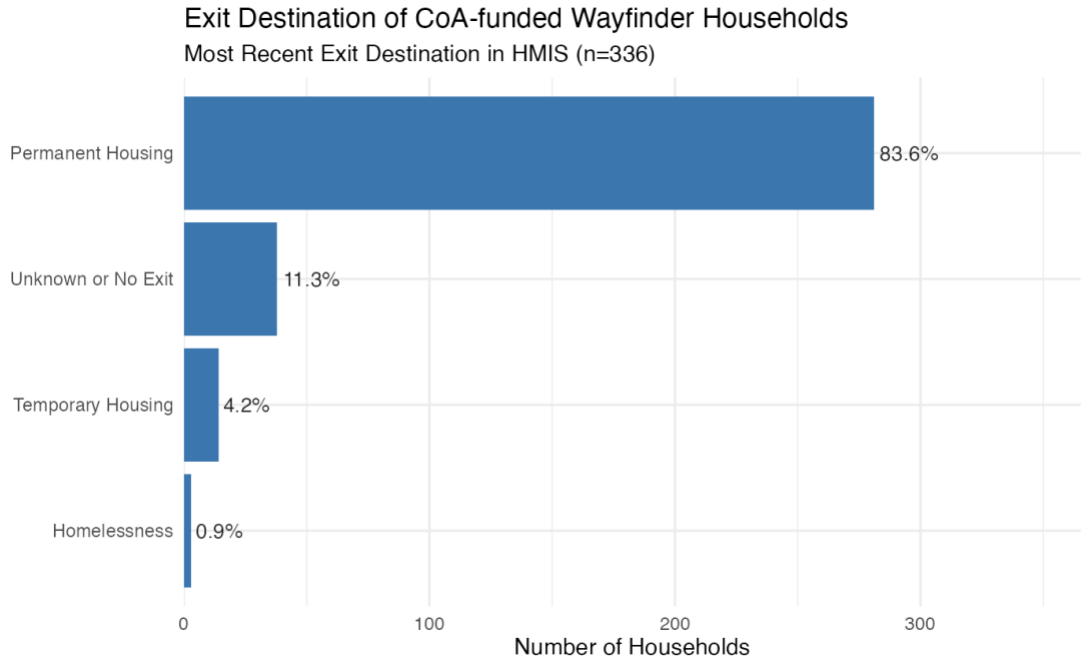
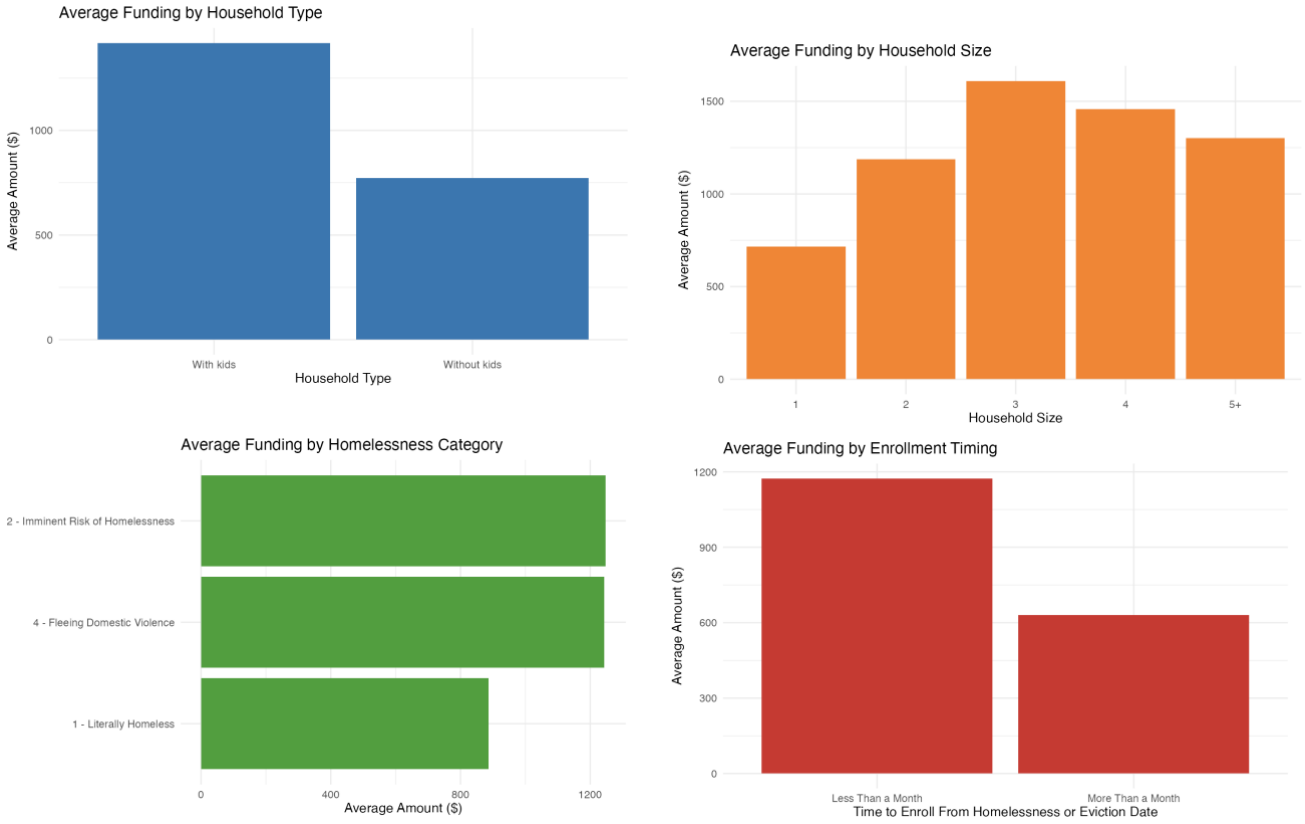


Figure 8

3. Funding

The average amount of money disbursed among CoA-funded Wayfinder Program households was $1,100.90. Figure 9 below shows the average amount provided, broken down by different categories. The main takeaways are the following:

- Family households (i.e., those with at least one child under the age of 18; n=171) received an average of about $1,418 in funds, while the average of households without children (n=165) received approximately $722.
- Relatedly, average funding rose with household size up to 3 people, then declined for households of 4 or more.
- Those who were experiencing category 1 homelessness (literally homeless) received an average of about $887, less than category 2 homelessness clients (~$1,247) and category 4 homelessness clients (~$1,244).
- Clients who enrolled in the program less than a month after eviction or homelessness had a higher average disbursement amount ($1,174) than those who enrolled a month or more after eviction or homelessness (~$630).



4. Factors Associated with Permanent Housing Exits

Excluding the 36 households with an open enrollment in HMIS as of July 30, 2026, 93% of households served by the Wayfinder program had their most recent HMIS exit to a permanent housing destination. Because so few households did not exit to permanent housing, this dataset has limited ability to

distinguish what separates those outcomes statistically; any patterns below should be read as associations worth noting, not confirmed drivers of success.

- Households with kids had a higher rate (97.1%) of exiting to a permanent housing destination than the full population (93.7%)
- Figure 10 shows that households who were literally homeless (category 1) at program enrollment had lower rates of permanent housing exits (87.1%) than clients experiencing other forms of homelessness. Further, of the 137 households who were at imminent risk of homelessness, 136 (99.3%) had a permanent housing exit.
- Breaking up the destination category further, Figure 11 shows that those whose most recent exit was to permanent housing had an average disbursement from the Wayfinder Program of $1,115. This amount is 7 times the amount of money received by clients who eventually exited to homelessness (~ $155) and nearly 9 times the amount for clients who exited to temporary housing situations (~$127).

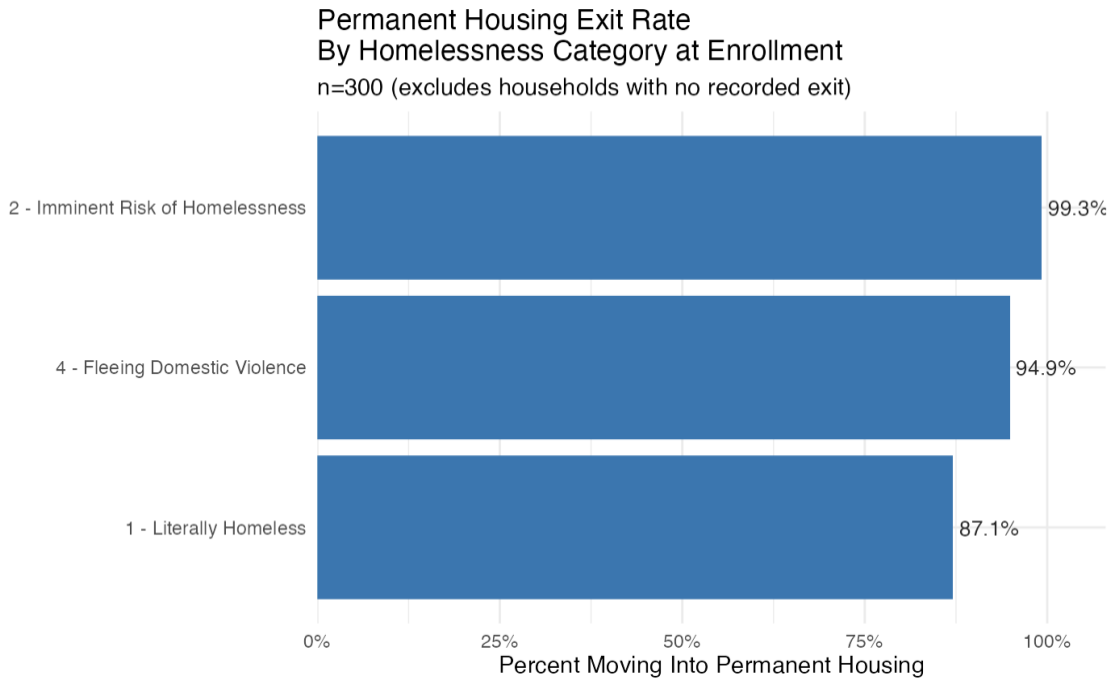


Figure 10

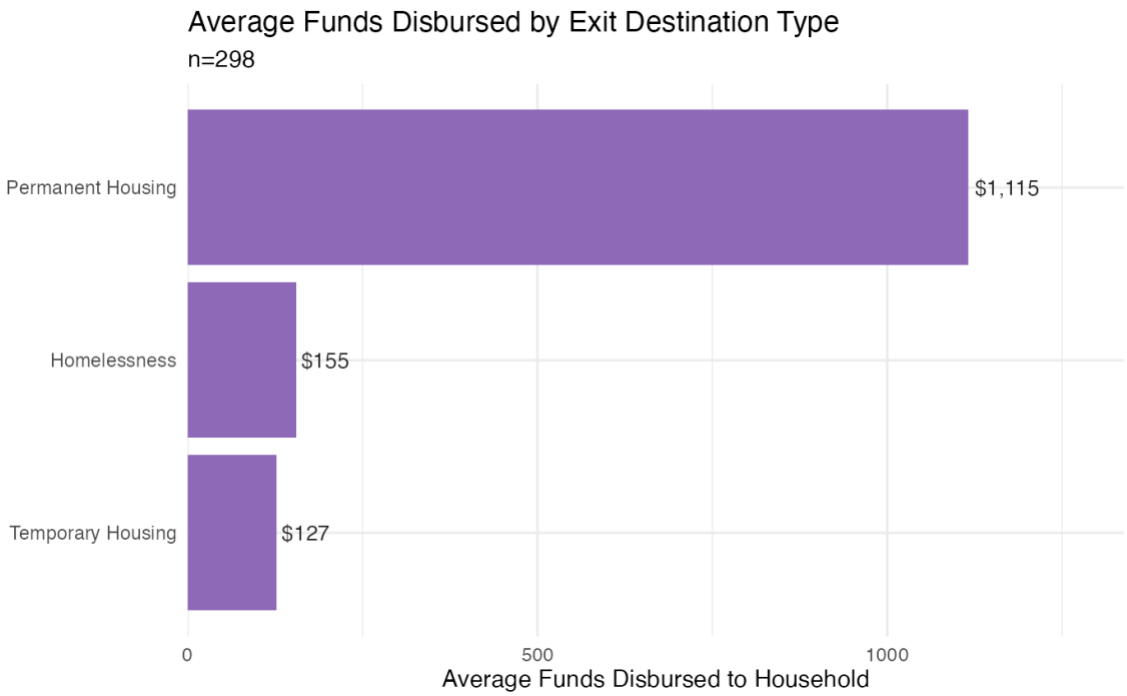


Figure 11

5. Assessing Returns to Homelessness

To identify returns to homelessness, we looked for Sunrise Wayfinder clients who had HMIS enrollments within 6 months of their permanent housing move-in date, as reported by Sunrise. This included households whose move-in was 6+ months prior to July 30, 2026 (the cutoff date for current HMIS data) as well as households whose move-in was less than 6 months prior to the cutoff date but had a known new enrollment. We found that out of the 265 households eligible for review, 29 of them (10.9%) had a new enrollment.

Of the 29 households with a new enrollment, 48 individual records were logged in HMIS during the window (one continuous stay at AAUL's CWS Emergency Shelter was logged as 9 nightly records rather than a single stay; accounting for that, there are 40 distinct episodes across the 29 households). Most of these episodes were with new Sunrise touchpoints: the Hotline, the Hub, Wellness, Coordinated Entry, and re-enrollment in Wayfinder itself. A few of these households specifically show a clear bounceback pattern: a Hub drop-in followed by a Hotline call followed closely by a new Wayfinder enrollment, often exiting to a new rental. This means these households moved into housing, cycled out of housing and back into the program, and into a second placement within 6 months, sometimes followed by another Hub or Hotline enrollment.

A smaller number of records were with other providers: one continuous Emergency Shelter stay at AAUL's CWS, one enrollment in Front Steps' SSVF Homelessness Prevention program, and one independent Coordinated Entry enrollment. Taken together, this suggests the 10.9% return rate is not an overcount of routine service use, but a reasonable indicator of households experiencing renewed housing instability after their Wayfinder exit.

Further details are in the figures below:

- Most (65.5%) households who returned did so within 60 days of their move-in (Figure 12)
- The majority of households that returned (55%) were 1- or 2-person households (Figure 13)
- The majority of households that returned (55%) were non-Hispanic Black households, a similar number to the percentage of total households served (Figure 14)
- The average total spent per returned household was $1,253 per household with a median of $831

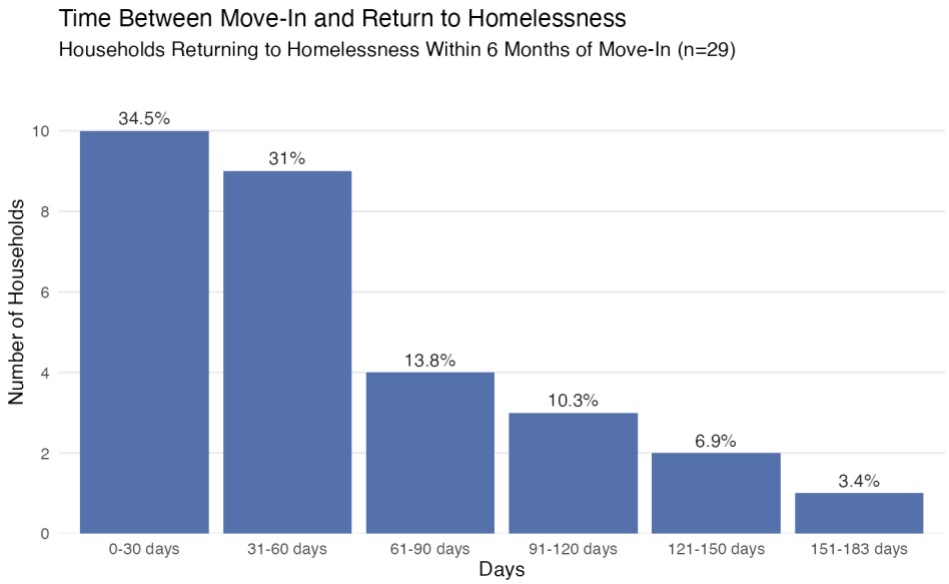


Figure 12

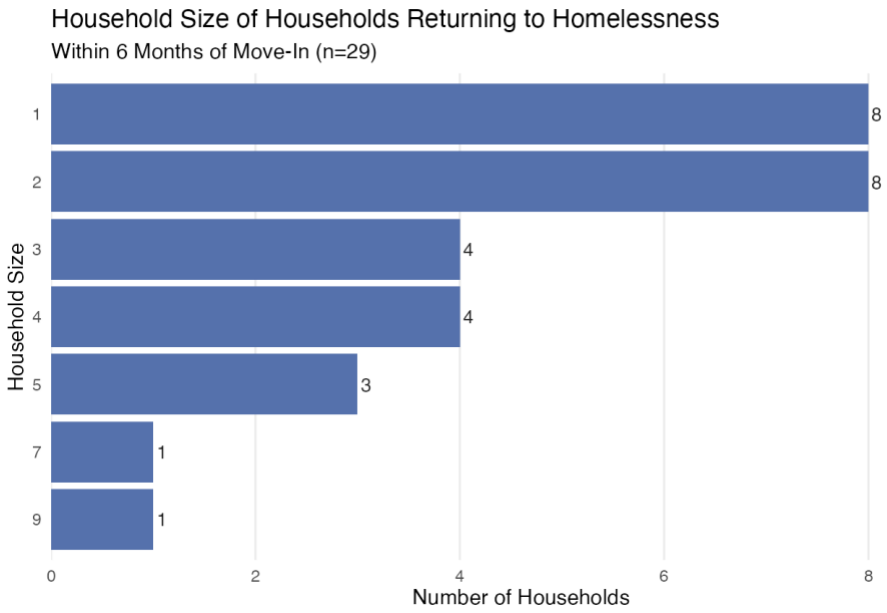


Figure 13

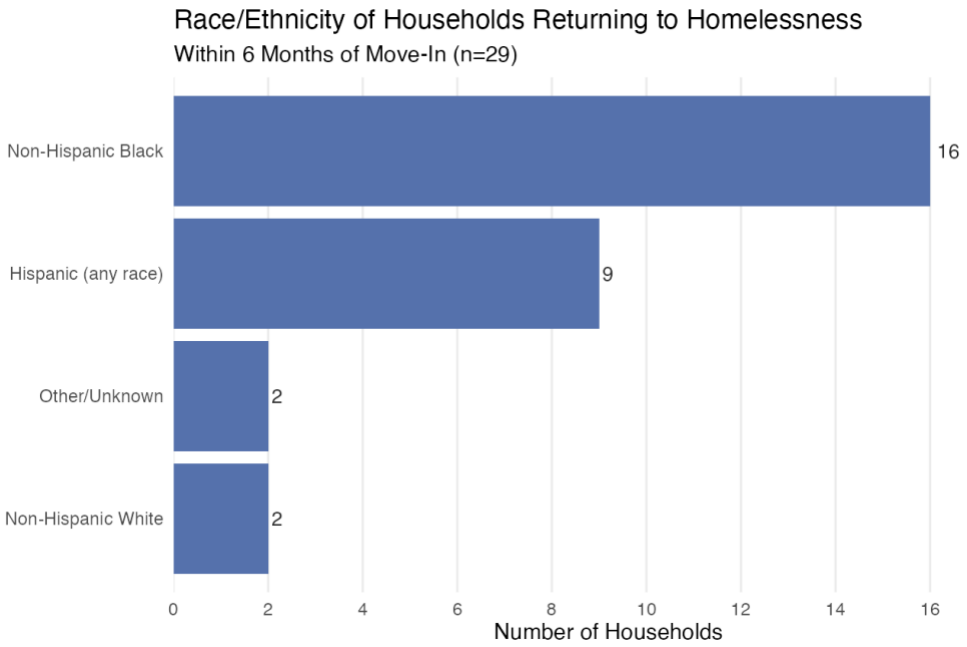


Figure 14

Conclusion

Findings from this reporting period indicate that the city-funded Wayfinder program continues to facilitate timely access to housing for households experiencing homelessness, at risk of homelessness, or fleeing domestic violence. Between November 2024 and July 2026, the program served 336 households, with more than 80% moving into housing within 30 days of enrollment and 93% of households with a recorded exit reaching a permanent housing destination. However, 10.9% of households assessed for returns to homelessness had a subsequent HMIS enrollment within six months, with most occurring within the first 60 days after move-in and 73% of enrollments occurring at Sunrise. These findings highlight both the program's promising housing outcomes and the importance of considering longer-term housing stability. Continued evaluation will examine differences in outcomes across household characteristics, patterns of financial assistance, and returns to homelessness to inform ongoing program refinement and identify opportunities to strengthen housing stability.