

# Addressing Housing Needs through Medicaid: Lessons from North Carolina's Healthy Opportunities Pilots Program

Community Fact Sheet | August 2024

Fact sheet drafted by Veronica Marshall-Kirk and designed by Alida Austin, summarizing the Duke-Margolis publication (to read more, [click here](#)): Huber K, Nohria R, Nandagiri V, et al. Addressing Housing-Related Social Needs Through Medicaid: Lessons From North Carolina's Healthy Opportunities Pilots Program. *Health Affairs*. 2024;43(2):190-199.

## What is the Healthy Opportunities Pilots program?



Health is affected by non-medical factors in an individual's daily life. Housing, food, transportation, and interpersonal violence and stress can all contribute to overall health. The Healthy Opportunities Pilots program ("Pilots") helps people with North Carolina Medicaid insurance to access services related to these non-medical factors. Services are currently available in communities across three parts of the state. People are usually connected with the program through their Medicaid health plan or a health care provider.

### The program's nine housing services focus on:

- Helping people find and stay in housing
- Fixing household safety and quality issues, such as getting rid of mold or pests
- Paying for certain housing needs, such as a security deposit or setting up utilities

## About the Study

To help the program and others like it nationwide, we studied the use of its nine housing services and housing needs in each of the three program regions.

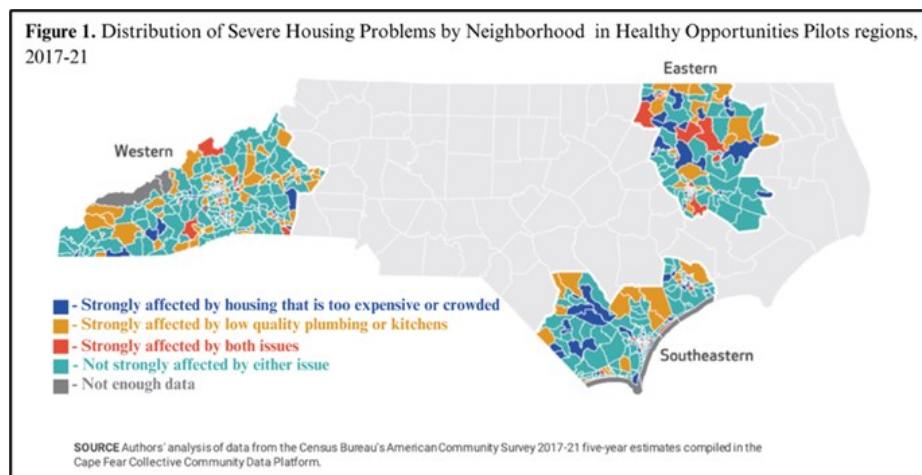
### How we gathered data:

- Interviews with 94 people involved in the Pilots and similar programs, including service providers, policymakers, and others. Of these, 38 specifically focused on housing services.

- Six meetings with groups of community health experts involved in the Pilots and similar programs.
- Two focus groups with community members who had personal experience with North Carolina Medicaid and Pilots services
  - These focus groups happened before Pilots housing services were launched but highlighted the needs for these services.
  - For example, one community member said, "Housing is definitely an issue in the area. It's so expensive. When you do find [a place to live], how can you afford it with lights and other bills?"
- Data analysis of housing needs and services in the three program regions

## Our Findings

**Peoples' housing needs are different across the program's regions.** The colors on the map show how different housing issues affect different neighborhoods in the program's regions. (Figure 1).



The services provided matched the most common housing issues in each region (Table 1).

Region	Most Common Housing Issue	Findings about Housing Service
Western	Low quality plumbing and kitchens	More housing safety and quality services than other regions
Southeastern	Expensive housing and too much crowding	More housing cost assistance services than other regions
Eastern	Both	A mix of services for both housing costs and housing safety and quality issues



housing organizations to participate in the program. Program leaders helped with this issue in creative ways, such as working with local philanthropies to create zero-interest loans, and developing a Business Solutions Center to train community organizations on financial skills.

### Defining and setting prices for housing services through Medicaid is complicated.



The complexity of the housing market and housing services—and lack of previous examples in other states—made it difficult for program leaders to set service prices. Local community organizations providing housing services said that current prices

are too low and do not cover the effort required. However, the descriptions for each housing service were flexible, which helped community organizations adjust to these challenges in creative ways.

### Successfully providing housing services through Medicaid involves working with different people and community organizations outside of Medicaid.

This can be challenging for community housing organizations and program leaders. For example, some reported that coordinating legal documents with landlords and finding available construction contractors are new to the health system. These challenges were overcome by working with state government, building networks of partners, and learning about how other public housing programs work with construction contractors.

### The high price of housing services requires creative financial solutions.

Local community housing organizations must pay upfront for housing services but then wait for health plans to review service requirements before paying them back. That can make it hard for some

### Takeaways for Future Programs

As organizations work to connect housing services and health care in North Carolina and nationwide, here are some big ideas to consider:

- Think about differences in housing needs across regions and states when describing and setting prices for housing services
- Design and price housing services with flexibility to adjust to unexpected cost challenges, since many housing services are new to Medicaid
- Offer legal assistance for housing needs
- Expand upon housing services provided by the Healthy Opportunities Pilots to address other housing issues (e.g., mortgage assistance, not just rental assistance)
- Make a financial plan for delivering housing services that helps community organizations of all sizes and capabilities participate in the program
- Participate in existing housing and health partnership learning collaboratives