Property Manager Survey Analysis: Back@Home, 2019-2020

DECEMBER 2020

Key Findings

- Over half (54%) of property managers praised the Back@Home program, tenants or rehousing agencies.
- Property managers expressed concern with the program or their tenants in approximately one-third (31%) of the surveys.
- Property managers felt future programs could be improved through quicker move-ins and rental payments. Additional housing stability services to ensure tenants are able to pay their rent after the subsidy ends was a frequent request among participating property managers.

Background

The Back@Home program provides essential rapid re-housing for households impacted by Hurricanes Florence (2018) and Dorian (2019) who have no other housing options. As a brand-new program, Back@Home utilized evidence-based best practices to assist displaced individuals and families in the 28 disaster-declared counties in North Carolina, shown in the black and red cross-section in Figure 1 below.[1]
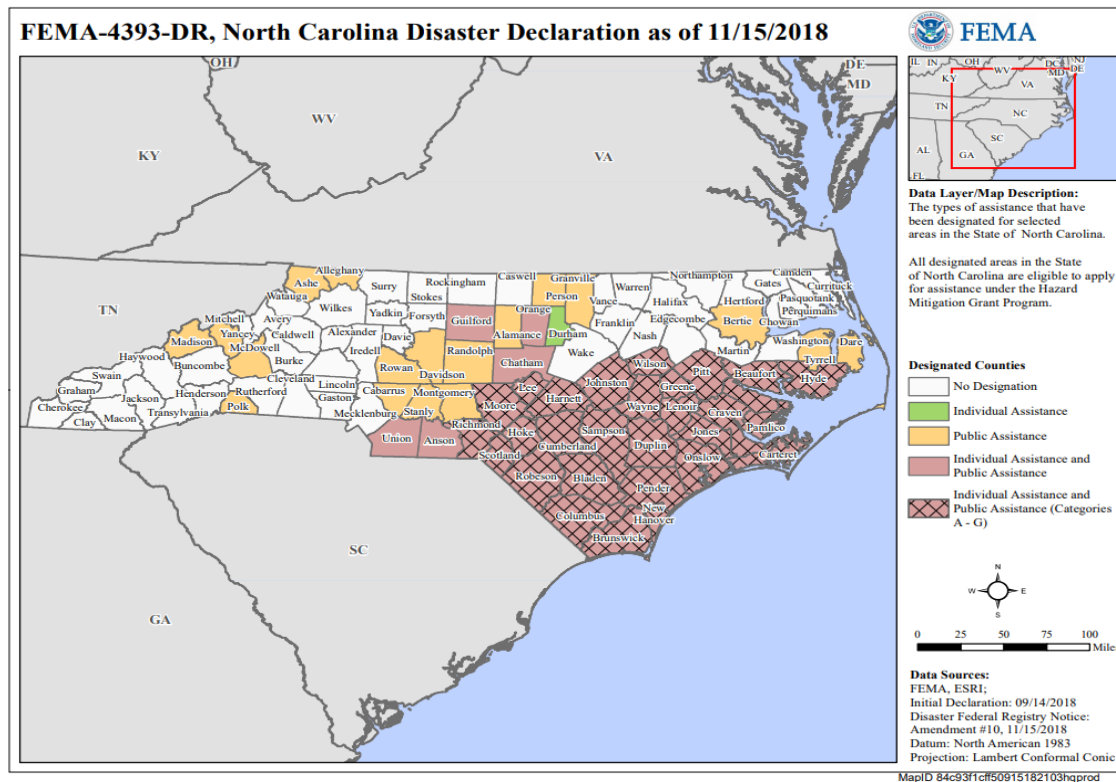

FIGURE 1

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[1] *About.* Back@Home North Carolina. Retrieved October, 27,2020. https://www.backathome.org/about
Figure 1: *FEMA-4393-DR, North Carolina Disaster Declaration as of 11/15/2018.* [Map]. (2018, November 15).
https://gis.fema.gov/maps/dec_4393.pdf

Hurricane Florence and Dorian forced over 22,000[2] and 1,500[3] North Carolinians, respectively, into disaster shelters. While some families were able to return to their homes and others found new housing, the most vulnerable residents struggled to secure safe and stable housing. Back@Home participants received: housing navigation services; short-term move-in and rental assistance (not intended to exceed 6 months); and housing stabilization services to aid them on their path to recovery and self-sufficiency. Back@Home has helped rehouse 691 families, including 893 adults and 735[4] children, for a total of 1,628 individuals. The Back@Home program is a partnership between the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (NCDHHS), the North Carolina Coalition to End Homelessness (NCCEH), the North Carolina Housing Finance Agency (NCHFA), and four local Rehousing Agencies: First Fruit Ministries, Southeast Family Violence Center, Trillium Health Resources and Volunteers of America Carolinas.

Back@home households required a variety of housing types to best meet their needs based on family size, housing location, and price. The most common housing types were apartments (35%) and single-family homes (28%). Other housing types included mobile homes (21%) and shared housing units, such as a room in a house with roommates not assisted by the program (16%). Rents ranged from $137 to $1,350 based on the household size, housing type, and location of housing. The median contract rent for a Back@Home unit was approximately $650.

NCHFA contracted with SocialServe to call and survey property managers who participated in Back@Home about their experience with the program. The goal of these calls was to solicit feedback on the Back@Home program and identify questions or issues related to the program, rehousing agencies or specific tenants. Property manager surveys were utilized to facilitate timely responses from NCCEH and NCDHHS staff to address any specific concerns and NCHFA staff to analyze the overall effectiveness of the program from the property managers' perspective.

Methods

NCHFA's Policy & Research team analyzed the survey responses to identify themes across property managers' responses to help inform and improve program management. Between April 2019 and October, 2020 SocialServe attempted to contact nearly 200 participating property managers. Of those, 128 (64%) individual property managers chose to provide feedback on their experience with the Back@Home program. Twelve of the 128 property managers provided two responses. The duplicate surveys occurred at different times or pertained to different units. Each duplicated pair of surveys were analyzed as one response in an effort to capture all information provided while also de-duplicating the data. Property manager interviews followed an established script to inquire about any concerns or positive experiences with the Back@Home program. Questions were open ended, allowing property managers the opportunity to provide any feedback they felt pertinent.

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[2] Lewis, M. (2019) *Back@Home North Carolina - Special Needs: Combating Homelessness.* https://www.ncsha.org/wp-content/uploads/North-Carolina-Special-Needs-Housing-Combating-Homelessness-2019.pdf
[3] Bridges, V. (2019, September 5). North Carolina makes pets a priority as families flee Hurricane Dorian. *The News & Observer.* https://www.newsobserver.com/news/weather-news/article234720127.html#:~:text=About%201%2C500%20people%20had%20entered,he%20visited%20the%20Durham%20shelter
[4] North Carolina Coalition to End Homelessness. (2020) *Phase 2 Back@Home Public Dashboard* [Data set].

Property Manager Responses

To analyze property manager's feedback on the Back@Home program, each of the 128 responses was categorized into the following groups: praise; concern; mixed response, and neutral. Praise responses contained only positive feedback about the program while concerns addressed issues property managers were having with either the program processes, the rehousing agency or their tenant. Mixed responses contained some type of positive response and a concern. For example, if a property manager said they were receiving late rental payments from Back@Home but they also praised their tenant for taking good care of the unit, this would be mixed response because of problem related to the program but the positive experience with the individual tenant. Finally, some property managers expressed neither praise or concern about the program but did state Back@Home was working just fine. These responses were categorized as neutral. Categorization of property manager responses is further explored in Figure two below.

Property Manager Comments

As a means to further analyze property manager feedback, survey responses were broken into various comments based on specific components and themes. Each property manager's response was considered one unit of data which could be broken down into multiple comments based on individual themes. This system allowed the analysis to capture details of the property managers' experience with the program. For example, if a property manager reported a tenant had an unauthorized occupant living with them and the police had been called to the property, the response would be coded as "Lease Violation (Unauthorized Occupant)" and "Police Call". To ensure an unbiased analysis, two team members separately reviewed and identified comments. Both sets of comments were then synthesized into a single set of comments used for the analysis. In total, the 128 property manager responses were broken into 219 individual comments.

A preliminary review of the 219 property manager comments revealed five basic comment types which differ slightly from the response types: (1) tenant issues, (2) program issues, (3) program praise, (4) program questions, (5) COVID-19. Within each comment type, several categories that captured specific concerns and themes were identified to be used in the analysis. Tenant issues were differentiated from program issues to identify feedback on overall program management, versus concerns related to individual tenants. Detailed analysis of the comments is examined in figures three, four and five below.

Back@Home Property Manager Responses

The analysis reveals over half (54%) of the 128 surveyed property managers praised the Back@Home program. As shown in Figure 2, 31% of property managers expressed concerns about the program. Additionally, 15 property managers (12%) had mixed experiences with the program. They expressed both praise and concern for certain components of the program. The remaining property managers responded with neutral responses, neither in favor or against the program. Program neutral responses only represented 3% of the total responses, as a result, they were not further analyzed below. The analysis in Figure 2 is based on the 128 property manager responses to capture the initial feedback.
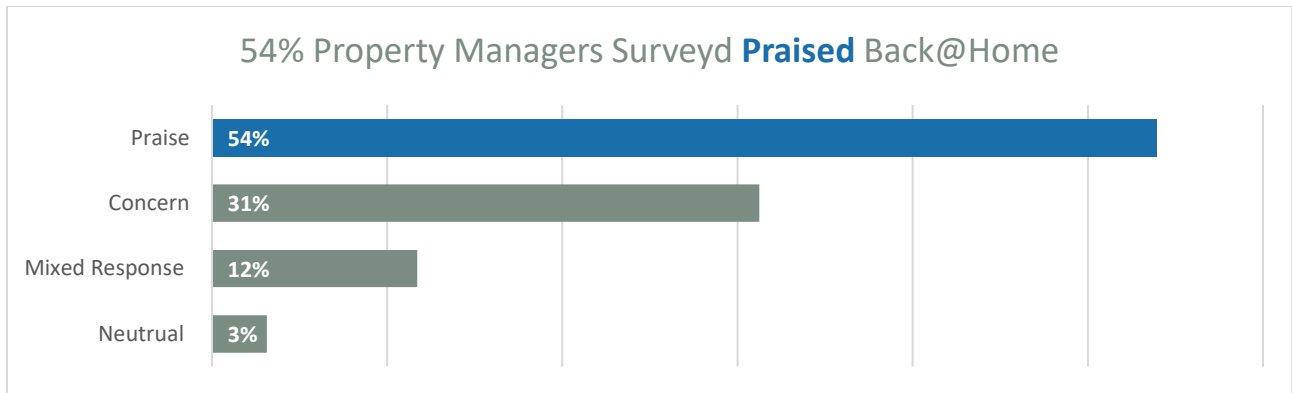

54% Property Managers Surveyd Praised Back@Home

- Praise: 54%
- Concern: 31%
- Mixed Response: 12%
- Neutrual: 3%

FIGURE 2

Comments - Program Praise

The following figures are based on the 219 coded comments drawn from the 128 property manager responses.

Coded analysis of property manager responses revealed that most comments praised the program. Program praise comments contained several subcategories to differentiate between overall Back@Home program success, praise for the individual tenants and praise for the Rehousing Agency. A single response could potentially be categorized as praise for the program, rehousing and tenant if they specifically addressed all these aspects. Additionally, if a property manager had a mixed response that contained partial praise and a concern, the praise comment is included in the figure below.

Figure 3 shows the breakdown of specific praise subcategories. Over half of the praise comments (63 out of 113) related to program specific praise. One Back@Home property manager expressed the following *"It's been an awesome program and it's a way to give a helping hand to those who have been displaced. It gives the tenant the opportunity to rebuild their home and gives them a sense of accomplishment."*

Property Manager Comments: Praise

- Program: 56%
- Rehousing Agency: 25%
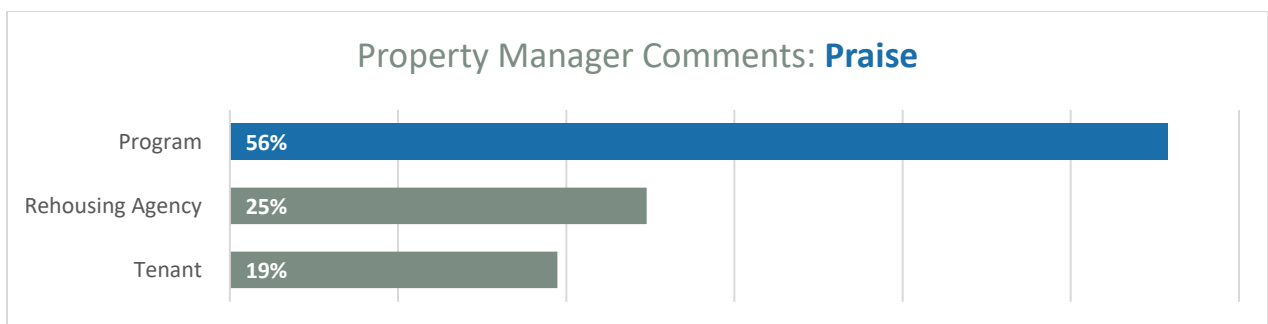- Tenant: 19%

FIGURE 3

Comments - Tenant Issues

After program praise, the most frequent comment referenced tenant issues. Forty nine of the 219 total comments related to tenant issues. Subcategories within tenant issues centered around: payment issues (with the tenant portion of rent or utilities); evictions; lease violations; unit maintenance and housekeeping problems; tenant behavioral concerns (such as disturbing neighbors); and criminal activity. As shown in Figure 4, certain subcategories occurred more frequently than others. Seventeen comments addressed concerns related to tenant rent payments while another eleven referenced planned or current evictions. Recurring concerns were passed onto DHHS for program management purposes.
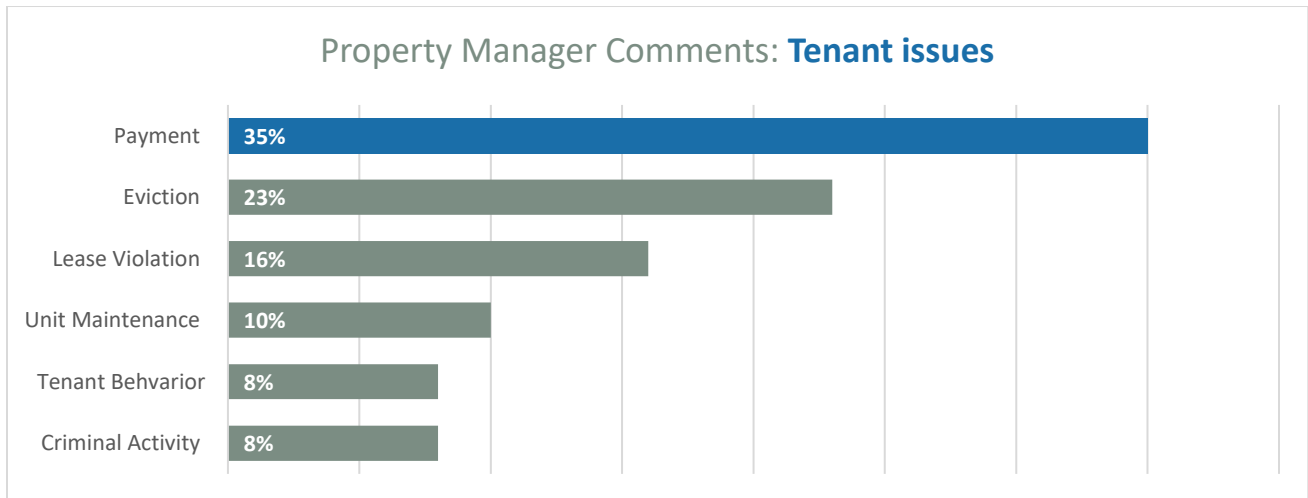
Property Manager Comments: **Tenant issues**

Category	Percentage
Payment	35%
Eviction	23%
Lease Violation	16%
Unit Maintenance	10%
Tenant Behvarior	8%
Criminal Activity	8%

FIGURE 4

Comments - Program Issues

Following closely behind tenant issues, program issues represented the third most prevalent comment. These responses included: perceived insufficient support for tenants; payment issues (such as property managers receiving late subsidy payments); issues communicating with or receiving assistance from the rehousing agencies; inadequate background checks; and other issues. As with tenant issues, frequently occurring program issues were identified and conveyed to DHHS program management. Fourteen comments related to support for tenants and twelve comments related to payment problems and, shown in Figure 5.
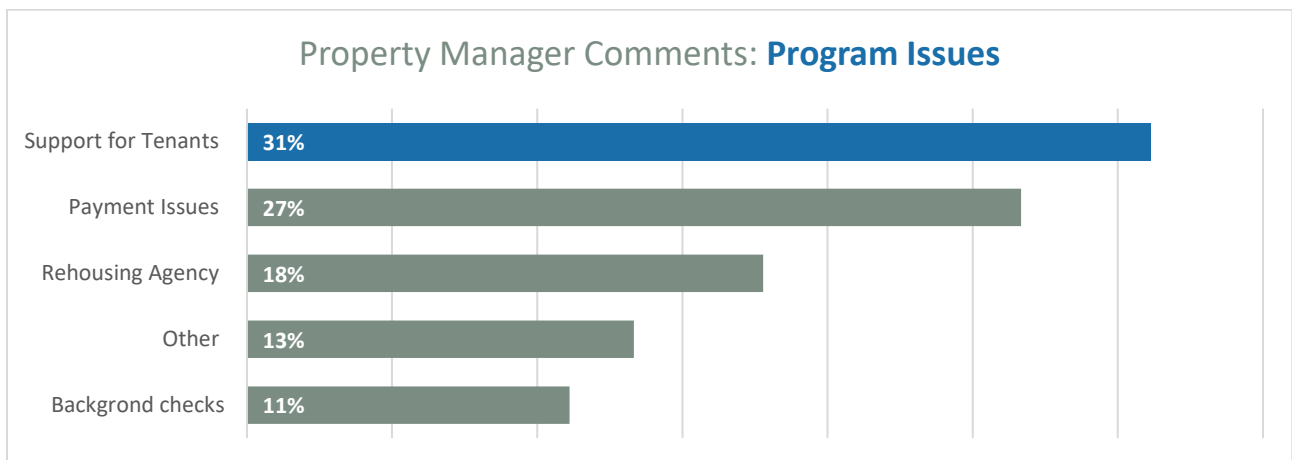
Property Manager Comments: **Program Issues**

Category	Percentage
Support for Tenants	31%
Payment Issues	27%
Rehousing Agency	18%
Other	13%
Backgrond checks	11%

FIGURE 5

Comments – Questions

A few property managers posed questions about the program which were coded separately. Two responses contained questions related to Back@Home. One property manager asked about receiving payments and another asked about tenant eligibility. These questions were passed along to program staff to be answered by the respective rehousing agency.

Comments – COVID-19

Starting in September 2020, six separate property managers indicated COVID-19 impacted their rental housing in some capacity. Two property managers indicated they wished to evict their tenant due to non-payment of rent but could not because of the COVID-19, presumably due to the Centers for Disease Control eviction mortarium which began on September 4, 2020.[5] Three property managers expressed concern for their tenants who had lost their jobs due to COVID-19 and one property manager stated they experienced payment issues related to COVID-19.

Recommendations for Future Programs

The property manager responses helped identify areas for improvement in future program development. Several property managers indicated they felt the criminal background checks were not sufficient and wished the Back@Home agencies would share more detailed information about tenants prior to lease-up. While property managers were not required to accept tenants who did not meet their eligibility criteria, providing upfront security deposit assistance or damage protection has been shown to increase property managers' willingness to participate in programs and ease any preconceived concerns related to potential tenants.[6]

Multiple property managers addressed concerns about timely and accurate rent payments from both the Back@Home subsidy and tenant rent portion. Property managers expressed a desire to expediate tenant move-in so they can receive the initial rent payment more quickly. While multiple factors may influence when a tenant can move-in, future programs could take these concerns into consideration if funding allows.

Property managers indicated the desire for consistent tenant and rental subsidy payments. These comments often coincided with concerns for tenants after the program ended. Multiple property managers stated they wished tenants received greater support services during the program and assistance securing employment or another rental subsidy to help them pay rent after the Back@Home program ended. As indicated by the positive feedback received about Back@Home, rental assistance programs with wrap around services can help both the tenants displaced by disasters and provide stable finances for property managers in impacted areas. However, multiple property managers wished the length of assistance was longer to allow households to become financially stable. For any future rental programs, identifying the experiences of property managers and tenants is key to fully understanding the impact of that program and detecting methods for improvement.

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[5] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (October 9, 2020). *Federal Register Notice: Temporary Halt in Residential Evictions to Prevent the Future Spread of COVID-19.* https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-eviction-declaration.html

[6] Office of Policy Development and Research. U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. (Winter 2019). *PHAs Encourage Landlord Participation with Incentives.* https://www.huduser.gov/portal/periodicals/em/winter19/highlight3.html

Conclusion

Overall, Back@Home property managers expressed positive experiences with the program and consider it to be success. More than have (54%) of all surveyed property managers provided positive feedback on the program, tenants or rehousing agencies. Consistent with other housing patterns seen in 2020, COVID-19 appeared to impact the some Backe@Home property managers and tenants.[7] Approximately one-third of property managers expressed concerns with the program. Most concerns related to support for tenants during and after the program, and payment issues with tenants and program subsidies. The consistent nature of the concerns allows opportunity for revisions in future programs. Despite some displeasure, many property managers provided positive feedback on Back@Home. One participating property manager stated, *"Everything was good with the program and the people involved with Back@Home have been fantastic. I always receive the rental payments in a timely manner and the tenant is happy."*

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[7] Leifheit, K., Linton, S., Raifman, J., Schwartz, G., Benfer, E., Zimmerman, F., Pollack, C. (2020). Expiring Eviction Moratoriums and COVID-19 Incidence and Mortality. *SSRN.* https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3739576

Appendix

Data Overview	
Property Manager Responses	
Number of Unique Property Managers	128
Number of property managers with duplicate responses*	12
Property Manager Response Categorization	
Praise	69
Concern	40
Mixed Response	15
Neutral	4
Consolidated Comments	
Total Number of Comments	219
Praise	113
Neutral	4
Tenant Issues	49
Program Issues	38
Program Questions	9
COVID-19	6

*Twelve property managers provided two survey responses. Of these 12 property managers, 7 had different units with different tenants participating in their Back@Home program so their responses represented unique situations. The other 5 landlords surveyed twice appeared to have been asked about the same unit but at different points in time. The responses from property managers surveyed twice were synthesized into one single response. As a result, each unique property manager represents one response.

Comment Codes

Tenant Issues	Program Questions	Program Issues	Program Praise
Damage to unit	Eligibility	Background check	Praise for program
Planned Eviction	Payment question	Other	Praise RA (Re-Housing Agency)
Eviction		Payment problem	Praise for tenants
Housekeeping		Process	Neutral
Illegal drug use		Support for tenants	
Late rent payment			
Non-payment of rent			
Other			
Police call			
Traffic in/out of unit			
Tenant has not moved out – end of program/lease			
Unannounced move-out			
Unauthorized occupant			
Utilities			
Won't answer door/ communicate			