

# Project Roomkey

*Lessons Learned Implementing a Novel Approach to Combating Homelessness*

## ABOUT PROJECT ROOMKEY

The [\*\*Project Roomkey and Rehousing Strategy \(PRK\) program\*\*](#) marked a transformative chapter in the state's battle against homelessness. The program, which was signed into law by Governor Newsom in 2020, was designed to provide Californians experiencing homelessness with temporary housing in hotel and motel rooms as an alternative to staying in congregate shelters, allowing them to safely isolate during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through this initiative, **over 62,000 individuals across the state have been served**. However, the program's impact extends far beyond the critical provision of temporary shelter during a public health emergency.

PRK serves as a testament to what can be achieved when **government agencies, communities, Tribes, and other organizations unite with urgency and a shared purpose**. Working together, these groups reached out to unhoused and vulnerable individuals as quickly as possible, connecting them to meaningful services and resources to keep them safe and housed.

PRK was funded with both state funds and federal dollars from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic state of emergency ending in California in February of 2023, and nationally in May 2023, the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and its technical assistance partner, [Change Well Project](#), are currently supporting communities in winding down their programs, while supporting PRK participants in achieving their housing goals to the greatest extent possible.



YouTube: Project Roomkey in Action

Amid this monumental effort, [Abt Global](#), with funding from the [California Healthcare Foundation](#) and the [Conrad N. Hilton Foundation](#), conducted a comprehensive evaluation

of PRK in its [\*\*\*Evaluation of California's Project Roomkey Program: Final Report\*\*\*](#). This evaluation aimed to assess the program's implementation **strategies, operational challenges, outcomes, and long-term impacts on individuals and communities**. The report findings provide valuable insights into the effectiveness and implications of PRK. They also offer lessons learned that may be informative for policymakers, practitioners, and advocates involved in current and future homelessness response efforts.

## **SPECIFICALLY, FINDINGS INDICATED:**

- **PRK was designed and implemented in record time.** Federal, state, and local government agencies, Tribal jurisdictions, and homeless service partners across the state worked together to design and implement the program, amid a serious public health emergency – all in a matter of weeks.
- **Most PRK participants reported having an overall positive experience.** PRK sites offered a model of service not commonly available at traditional congregate shelters. PRK offered participants a sense of autonomy and privacy by providing people a space of their own where they could store their possessions and didn't need to separate from their partners or pets. PRK showed that people experiencing unsheltered homelessness will accept shelter if they are offered housing that meets their needs.
- **Many PRK participants were medically vulnerable and needed a high level of care.** Some PRK participants required a higher level of care than county and homeless service system leadership anticipated – indicating that the level of medical attention and need among unhoused individuals may have been hidden previously. Having health services on site facilitated better access to health care.
- **PRK was able to exit more residents into permanent housing through longer stays and more sustained supportive services.** The Homeless Management Information Systems (HMIS) data from three counties suggest that the longer someone stayed in PRK, the less likely they were to exit to homelessness and more likely they were to exit to permanent housing. These longer stays appear to have enabled program participants to stabilize, and the infusion of housing resources during the pandemic made it possible for them to obtain permanent housing at higher rates.

## SUPPORTING THE WHOLE PERSON

While PRK initially was designed to be a temporary solution, it evolved to help address the long-term needs of program participants. This included intensive outreach to identify the most vulnerable individuals needing services, providing onsite healthcare and mental health services and referrals for PRK residents, facilitating transition to safe and stable housing for program participants through housing navigation and case management services, and ongoing strengthened partnerships between federal, state, and county agencies and private hotels and motels to address the housing crisis in California. Through PRK, California **significantly increased non-congregate shelter capacity across the state. Also, progress was made related to the pairing of shelters and supportive services needed to achieve permanent housing.**

***Marcus Dillard, former Supervising Development Specialist for the Housing Authority in Riverside County, shared how critical PRK was. The program “allowed [them] to address the immediate needs of a lot of individuals while providing supportive services and a pathway that many people didn’t think was available to them.”***

## HOUSING FIRST

PRK utilized [Housing First<sup>1,2</sup> strategies](#) to offer temporary housing and supportive services without any preconditions, which allowed participants to stabilize their situation more easily. This baseline stability allowed participants to more effectively engage in services which could position them to obtain and maintain longer-term housing. Stabilization services are highlighted as a policy recommendation in the Abt Global report for the State to uphold and expand.

**Natalie Siva**, Coordinated Entry Specialist in the Health, Housing and Homeless Services for Contra Costa County noted the story of a family with a single father and four kids who had been in and out of homelessness for 10 years, and how the collaboration between PRK providers was critical to the family's success: ***“Through Project Roomkey, not only were we able to get people a hotel room, but we were able to help them secure a housing voucher that allowed them to rent a whole house. It was a big lift, and it took a lot of our providers coming together and going the extra mile to get all the paperwork done and connect with a landlord before the voucher expired. But thanks to all that work, we were successful – and it’s so great knowing those kids now get to live in their very own house.”***

<sup>1</sup> [Housing First in Permanent Supportive Housing Brief \(hudexchange.info\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> [CDSS - ALL COUNTY LETTER NO. 19-114](#) IMPLEMENTATION OF SENATE BILL (SB) 1380: HOUSING FIRST REQUIREMENTS FOR ALL STATE-FUNDED PROGRAMS THAT PROVIDE HOUSING OR HOUSING-RELATED SERVICES TO PEOPLE EXPERIENCING OR AT-RISK OF HOMELESSNESS

For example, many PRK sites offered free meals and nutritional support, allowing participants to focus on other critical needs, such as mental health and employment services. **Jennifer Palmer, Director of Housing & Homeless Services for Napa County**, observed that participants experienced noticeable gains in health through receiving “what we all need - a safe place to be and three meals a day.”

In Santa Cruz County, Disaster Service Workers were quickly mobilized to staff PRK sites with professionals from health, behavioral health, and housing agencies delivering services onsite to holistically address each participant's needs. Santa Cruz County partnered with several different non-profits to provide wellness services to participants to support their efforts in seeking and maintaining stable housing. For example, they worked with local artists to lead art projects, engaged nonprofits to run group exercise classes held outdoors, and connected with volunteers at the non-profit group, Miracle Messages, to make weekly phone calls to participants to check in on them and ensure they were doing well.

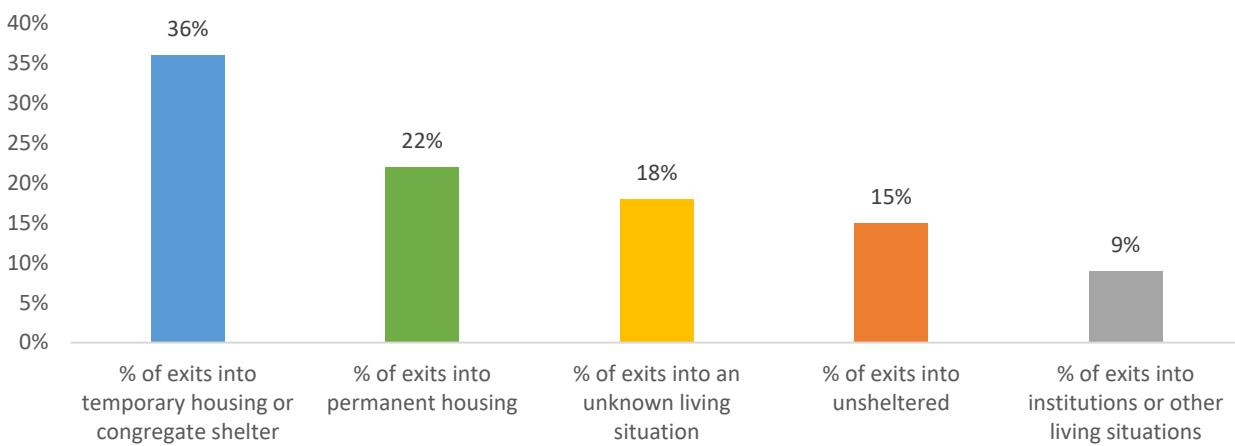
## COLLABORATION

PRK stands as an unprecedented example of successful collaboration among government entities, local communities, and non-profit organizations. Many hotel/motel owners and landlords reported that they had a positive experience with the PRK program. They shared that the partnership with and support from cities, counties, and the state broke down stigmas and helped repair relationships between unhoused individuals and business communities. The continuation of this collaboration and partnership is highlighted as another policy recommendation in Abt Global's report on PRK.

**Heidi Marston**, the former Executive Director of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, noted, **“Project Roomkey has shown what can happen when all levels of government focus on a rehousing solution.”**

## RESULTS AND OUTCOMES

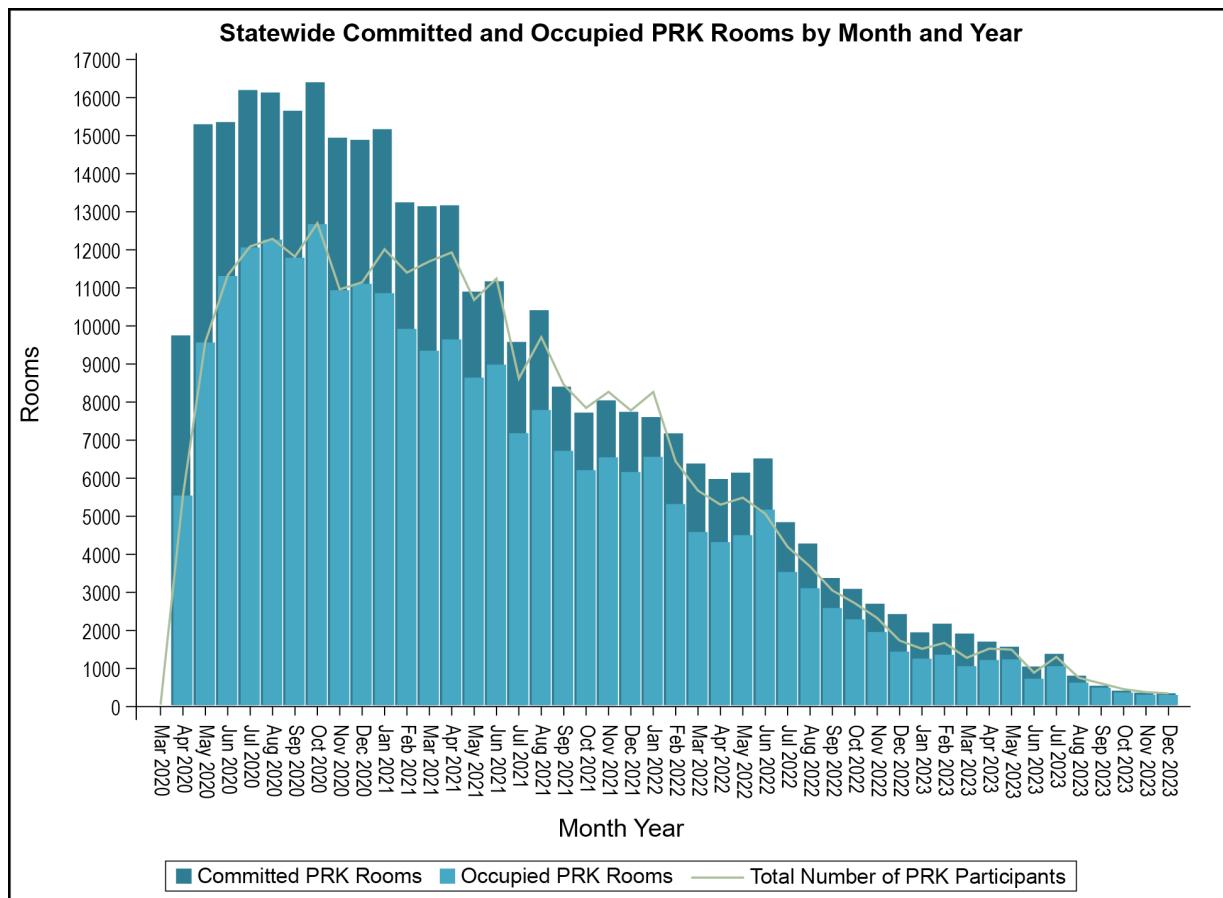
Since the launch of PRK, over 62,000 individuals have received temporary housing through the PRK program, which in many cases, also includes other supportive services such as daily meals, access to healthcare, emotional health and well-being support, and housing navigation and case management services. As of January 2024, 22% of PRK participants were permanently housed; 36% were placed into temporary housing or congregate shelter; 9% to institutions or other; and 18% to unknown destinations. The remaining 15% returned to unsheltered homelessness.<sup>3</sup>



Additionally, local data available to the evaluation suggested that the longer someone stayed in PRK, the less likely they were to exit to homelessness and the more likely they were to exit to permanent housing.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2021), the peak of PRK included over 16,000 available rooms across the state.

<sup>3</sup> This can be compared to the [California Interagency Council on Homelessness \(Cal ICH\) Homeless Data Integration System \(HDIS\) reporting](#) that in the period of 2018 to 2021, approximately 15.4% of people exiting supportive programs that report data to HDIS exited back to unsheltered homelessness. This indicates that even though PRK served many individuals with the highest vulnerabilities and service needs, including medically vulnerable and older adults, the rate of exit to unsheltered homelessness is comparable to other housing and homeless programs, pointing to the success of this program.



Abt Global, Evaluation of California's Project Roomkey Program, 2024

## BUILDING ON THE SUCCESS OF PROJECT ROOMKEY

Building on the success of PRK, the [Homekey grant program](#) was developed and is currently being administered by the California Department of Housing and Community Development. The program **created additional opportunities for agencies to acquire and convert hotels, motels, apartments, and other buildings into long-term homes** for people experiencing, or at risk of homelessness.

Since July 2021, [the CDSS has expanded its scope](#) to develop and rapidly scale housing solutions for medically vulnerable and older adults, in line with the [Master Plan for Aging](#). Programs like the [Housing and Disability Advocacy program](#), [Home Safe program](#), and the [Community Care Expansion program](#) provide **financial assistance, case management, and housing solutions for vulnerable older adults and those with medical conditions and disabilities** across the State.

While the CDSS supports many counties in winding down their programs, there are a few counties that have elected to continue their PRK work of utilizing hotels and motels as interim housing, matching another of Abt Global's recommendations. **Current**

**occupancy rates can be found on the [PRK data dashboard](#).** The experience of implementing and maintaining the PRK program has opened possibilities across the state to utilize non-traditional, non-congregate care to address homelessness.

Remarking on the number of rooms secured and the swift coordination between systems, **Governor Newsom** stated, ***"Our city and county partners – the front lines of our state's COVID response – stepped up when the pandemic hit... [T]hey continue this heroic work day in and day out."***

As we celebrate PRK's incredible achievements, **California reaffirms its commitment to leaving no one behind in the fight against homelessness and extends its gratitude to all partners, stakeholders, and individuals who have contributed to the success of PRK.**