



## *Solid Ground Executive Summary: A Summary of Multi-Year Process Evaluations of Solid Ground, a Family Homelessness Prevention Program Piloted by New Economics for Women in Van Nuys, California*

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The Solid Ground homelessness prevention pilot was started in 2018, with a goal of serving families in Van Nuys, California (zip code 91405) who may be at risk of homelessness but who do not qualify for the homelessness prevention services provided by the Los Angeles County homelessness services sector.<sup>1</sup> The pilot is administered by New Economics for Women (NEW), a nonprofit that administers a FamilySource Center. FamilySource Centers are located in high-need areas and are designed to assist low to moderate-income families with a continuum of services, including financial counseling and referrals to community resources. While Solid Ground was originally conceived as a two-year pilot, it was extended and NEW continues to operate it. The Solid Ground program was previously administered by the Housing Department and now falls under the purview of the Community Investment for Families Department (CIFD). Since 2021, CIFD has created seven additional Solid Ground homelessness prevention programs at FamilySource Centers throughout Los Angeles.

This brief summarizes the key findings from three process evaluations the California Policy Lab conducted of Solid Ground over three years. Each in-depth evaluation is also available on the [California Policy Lab website](#). Solid Ground offers two programs: “Full Solid Ground” and “Brief Solid Ground.” To qualify for Full Solid Ground, a family must be imminently at-risk of becoming homeless **and** score a 16 or more on the Prevention Targeting Tool (PTT). To qualify for Brief Solid Ground, a family must score 16 or more on the PTT **or** be imminently at risk of homelessness.

Brief Solid Ground consists of one appointment with Solid Ground staff that may include: brief case management services; mediation and/or landlord dispute resolution services; referrals to mainstream benefits and/or other community resources; referral and linkage to legal services; and limited financial assistance (e.g., transportation and grocery cards). Full Solid Ground includes six months of all of the services available to Brief Solid Ground participants, in addition to direct financial support such as rental assistance (though not all Full Solid Ground participants receive financial assistance).

## KEY FINDINGS:

The California Policy Lab conducted process evaluations for the Solid Ground program in FY 2018-2019, FY 2019-2020, and FY 2020-2021.<sup>2</sup> The goal of these evaluations is to document:

- program activities during the three years of the Solid Ground pilot;
- participant demographics, household composition, and prior homelessness services enrollments as observed in the Homelessness Management Information System data (HMIS);
- financial assistance, other assistance, and services that Brief and Full Solid Ground enrollees received; and
- income, employment, and living situations at enrollment for Brief and Full Solid Ground participants; and the same measures for Full Solid Ground participants at exit.

In the section below, we summarize these metrics and compare how metrics varied in Years One, Two, and Three of the pilot.

**Enrollment:** Solid Ground enrollment targets for each year were 50 Brief and 30 Full participants. These goals were met during Year One and Three, though enrollment in Full Solid Ground was lower during Year Two because of the pandemic.

TABLE 1. Enrollment in Brief and Full Solid Ground

	Brief Solid Ground	Full Solid Ground
Year One (FY 2018-19)	50	30
Year Two* (FY 2019-20)	66	14
Year Three (FY 2020-21)	71	34

\*In Year Two, program staff aimed to enroll 30 Full and 50 Brief participants, but because of the barriers to outreach, intake, and eligibility raised by the pandemic, staff were only able to enroll 14 Full participants. However, they were able to serve 66 Brief participants, 16 more than their goal.

## Participant demographics

During the three years of Solid Ground, both programs served predominantly Latino households, where the head of household was most often female and typically between the ages of 25 and 44.

## Participant housing status at Solid Ground enrollment and exit:

For both programs, in Year One, less than half of the households lived in market rate rentals when they enrolled and exited the Solid Ground program. In Year Two and Three, the majority of the households lived in a market rate rental when they enrolled and exited the program.

Based on HMIS data, no participants in either program in Year One or Two subsequently became homeless within the twelve months after exiting the program, while one household in Year Three became homeless.<sup>3</sup>

TABLE 2. Housing status for Solid Ground participants at enrollment and exit

	% living in a market rate rental at enrollment and exit
Year One* (FY 2018-19)	40%
Year Two (FY 2019-20)	95%
Year Three (FY 2020-21)	99%

\*During their time receiving Solid Ground services, another 37% of households relocated from living doubled-up with family to their own market rate rental.

**Services provided:** Solid Ground participants received a mix of services. HMIS data shows that Brief participants received services such as credit counseling and financial literacy, and also received grocery cards and baby supplies. In addition to these supportive services, Full participants also received financial assistance such as utility arrears, rental arrears, rental assistance, utility payments, and utility and security deposits.

TABLE 3. Average amount of financial assistance provided to Full Solid Ground participants

	Rental assistance	\$ assistance (i.e. grocery cards)
Year One (FY 2018-19)	\$1,647	\$823
Year Two (FY 2019-20)	\$1,384	\$774
Year Three (FY 2020-21)	\$2,865	\$1,989

**Employment, income, insurance, and benefits**

In Year One, there were improvements in employment, earned income, and total income for Full Solid Ground participants, though these findings were based only on 17 households so the association between Solid Ground and these outcomes cannot be considered causal without further data collection and analysis.

In Year Two (the year the pandemic began), there were no overall changes in employment, and average earned income remained about the same for Full Solid Ground participant households. We observed little change in total income, which includes earned income and benefit income.<sup>4</sup> We also observed a small increase in benefit utilization and health insurance coverage in 10 households. However, because this sample is small, the results may not generalize to other households, and the association between Solid Ground and these outcomes cannot be considered causal without further data collection and analysis.

In Year Three, Full Solid Ground participants had improvements in employment, earned income, and total income, as well as very small improvements in benefits receipt and health insurance coverage. Again, the association between Solid Ground and these outcomes cannot be considered causal without further data collection and analysis.

**Prior homelessness:** Households enrolled in Solid Ground exhibited remarkably low rates of prior homelessness. Only two participants in each of the first three years had prior HMIS contact in the five years before enrollment in Solid Ground.

**Risk of future homelessness:** While Solid Ground was designed to prevent homelessness, we were unable to determine what portion of participants in Years One, Two, and Three were at risk for homelessness, particularly in the short term.

TABLE 4. Average amount of financial assistance provided to Brief Solid Ground participants

	\$ assistance (i.e. grocery cards)*
Year One (FY 2018-19)	\$96
Year Two (FY 2019-20)	\$118
Year Three (FY 2020-21)	\$123

\*Brief Solid Ground participants usually receive only financial assistance for food via grocery cards.

Based on HMIS data, it appears that very few households had prior histories of homelessness, which is an important risk factor for future homelessness. To provide additional context, we compare prior rates of homelessness for Solid Ground participants to participants who received services from the Coordinated Entry System (CES).

In Year One, CES homelessness prevention participants were around 14 times more likely than Solid Ground participants to have experienced homelessness prior to enrollment in prevention. In Year Two, CES homelessness prevention participants were around 11 times more likely, and in Year Three, CES homelessness prevention participants were around 19 times more likely. While lack of subsequent enrollments in homelessness services could be an indicator of program success, it may also be an indicator the program was not enrolling households at high risk of homelessness.

**Recommendations**

In the course of our process evaluation and interviews with program staff, CPL learned about a number of challenges and notable successes with Solid Ground. We summarize these observations below in policy recommendations. Although these recommendations are based on the first three years of operation of the Solid Ground pilot in Van Nuys, they may be applicable to Solid Ground programs at other FamilySource Centers and prevention programs in Los Angeles generally:

- **Maintain flexible screening criteria:** Because the program requires proof of imminent risk of homelessness, the eviction moratoria related to the Covid-19 pandemic became a major barrier to enrollment in Year Two of the Solid Ground pilot. Families behind on rent did not receive eviction notices or other notices that could provide proof of imminent risk of homelessness and thus could not qualify for

the Full Solid Ground program. Even in the absence of eviction moratoria, families who are doubled up might not receive eviction notices or other notices to prove their imminent risk of homelessness. To ensure that lack of formal eviction notices does not pose a barrier to program participation, programs like Solid Ground should adopt practices such as serving families that are several months behind on rent and develop flexible ways of verifying rental arrears, such as contacting landlords to request rent ledgers.

- **Create and maintain a strong relationship with a legal service provider:** After each of the first three years of the Solid Ground pilot, program staff emphasized the importance of their connection to Inner City Law Center, a legal aid provider. Inner City Law Center staff assisted participants with critical issues such as understanding and exercising their housing rights, addressing housing condition issues, and resolving debt and credit issues.
- **Create and maintain relationships with landlords:** During Year One, program staff educated landlords who were hesitant to accept rental checks from third parties. By Year Three, program staff had built strong relationships with landlords, facilitating faster acceptance of rental assistance. Strong landlord engagement, including educating landlords about the legal requirement to accept rental assistance checks from third parties, encouraging referrals from landlords, and engaging landlords in mediation, is critical to program effectiveness.
- **Be flexible in services and assistance offered:** Over the course of the three years, participants needed different supports and services, including debt, credit, and budgeting support, and legal advice related to the eviction moratoria. Flexibility in services allows the program to address evolving economic and legal landscapes and diverse participant needs.
- **Collect uniform and universal participant data:** As noted in the Year One report, housing retention is a useful metric to track internally. Although HMIS data allowed us to see broad categories of housing situations at entry and exit, we could only loosely infer that households had stayed in the same unit because the HMIS data lacks specificity (e.g., in Year One, almost 40% of households reported living in a market rate

rental at enrollment and exit, which provides suggestive evidence that supportive services can help people retain their housing). Internally tracking housing retention would allow prevention providers to determine whether housing stability plans for participants are effective. In addition, as noted in our Year Two report, participant data on unemployment, food security, and unpaid rent is a critical component of this planning process. Unfortunately, administrative data in these areas is currently very limited. Therefore, the collection of uniform and universal data (i.e., data on unemployment, food security, housing retention and unpaid rent) across homelessness prevention programs will allow service providers and policymakers to plan for evolving needs of families at risk of homelessness.

- **Implement eligibility criteria that target assistance to people who would very likely become homeless without it:** It is unclear what portion of the families who participated in Solid Ground in Years One, Two, and Three were at risk of homelessness, particularly in the short term. Households enrolled in Solid Ground in Years One, Two, and Three exhibited remarkably low rates of prior homelessness and only one household in Year Three experienced homelessness after Solid Ground enrollment. Although it may signal prevention program success that such a small number of Solid Ground participants subsequently experienced homelessness, it may also suggest that the families enrolled in Solid Ground were not at high risk of homelessness before their enrollment.

One of the biggest challenges with homelessness prevention is making sure that assistance is targeted to people who would become homeless without it. To better achieve this goal, we recommend that Solid Ground and other homelessness prevention programs consider implementing the following eligibility criteria:

- Restrict eligibility to households who have income at 30% of the Area Median Income (AMI) or lower.<sup>5</sup> While there is no rigorous research to support a specific income threshold, past studies have found that using an 80% AMI threshold results in a program largely serving people who are not at risk of homelessness. We recommend a maximum threshold of 30% AMI for targeting cash assistance for homelessness prevention. The impact of implementing more restrictive eligibility requirements should be studied in a rigorous evaluation to determine if the new requirements help to better achieve the program goals.

- Restrict eligibility to households at imminent risk of losing housing, though not tied to a formal eviction proceeding.
- In addition, if program funding is restricted, the use of a screening tool, such as the Prevention Targeting Tool, may be another way to ensure that finite resources are targeted to the households at the highest risk of homelessness.

The three in-depth process evaluations for Years 1, 2, and 3 of Solid Ground are available on the California Policy Lab website: [Solid Ground Evaluations](#).

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### Endnotes

1. Homelessness prevention programs for families in the homelessness services sectors are administered by Family Solutions Centers. Staff at Family Solution Centers such as LA Family Housing screen families with the Coordinated Entry System for Families Screening Tool. In order to qualify for traditional Measure H prevention services in Los Angeles County, the family must:
  - Meet the definition of a family.
  - Be at or below 50% area median income.
  - Be imminently at-risk of homelessness (will imminently lose their primary nighttime residence within 30 days AND have no subsequent residence identified AND lacks the resources or support networks needed to obtain other permanent housing).
 Families who are imminently at-risk and meet the initial eligibility criteria are scored with a targeting tool, the “Prevention Targeting Tool” (PTT)# and assigned to service groups based on their score:
  - If they score less than 21, then the family is eligible for light touch services
  - If they score more than 21, the family is eligible for prevention services
 “Light touch” services include referral and linkage to other services in another program within the CES area. Prior to Solid Ground, families with less severe housing issues and who scored less than 21 were not eligible for traditional prevention services. In an effort to address these issues in SPA 2, Los Angeles County Supervisor Sheila Kuehl invested \$300,000 in discretionary funding in Solid Ground. Solid Ground has three primary objectives:
  - to make homelessness prevention services available to a wider range of families at risk of homelessness;
  - to precisely allocate financial assistance as a homelessness prevention service to only the at-risk families who would, without it, become homeless; and
  - to reach at-risk families in a specific geographic region by conducting targeted outreach of the program’s services.
2. This research was approved under IRB#18-000983 by the UCLA Institutional Review Board at the UCLA Office of the Human Research and Protection Program.
3. This is based on households captured in the HMIS. Just one of the 105 households enrolled in Year Three was subsequently enrolled into an HMIS project within 12 months of Solid Ground enrollment.
4. In Year Two, we do not observe similar improvements, though these findings are based on only 10 households that completed the program and cannot be considered causal without further data collection and analysis. At program entry, 6 households (60%) reported earned income (e.g., employment income) and that number did not change. We observed a small decrease in average monthly household earned income among those with earned income from \$1,841 to \$1,809. At entry, all ten households reported having income from any source, but this decreased to 8 households at program exit
5. Currently, to receive Solid Ground services, participants must be at or below 50% Area Median Income (AMI).