Relocating Homeless Resource Centers in Salt Lake County: What Were the Mobility Impacts?

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How can relocating services away from a downtown center change the transportation decisions and patterns for persons experiencing homelessness? And how do those changes affect access to the services they need? New research from the University of Utah (UU) examines the impacts of decentralizing homeless service locations through a case study in Salt Lake County, Utah. Prior to 2019, resources for people experiencing homelessness in the county were concentrated in a single location: The Road Home—a nonprofit social services agency located downtown within the free fare zone for TRAX light rail. In 2019, Salt Lake County transitioned to a decentralized, scattered site model with multiple shelter locations. Three new Homeless Resource Centers (HRCs), operated by various providers, were built and opened outside of downtown Salt Lake City.

Researchers surveyed clients of the three new HRCs (106 respondents) and conducted qualitative interviews with 19 HRC clients who had previously accessed services at the old downtown shelter. They also interviewed 24 service providers and decision makers involved with homeless services in the region, and conducted spatial and statistical analyses of proximity to basic and essential services for clients of the three new resource centers. The final report offers policy and practice recommendations to mitigate transportation issues that arise when homeless services are restructured.

"Transportation has to be key to the design and siting of services. Transportation and access to basic resources are so interlinked; we need to be thinking from more of a comprehensive planning framework," said Sarah Canham, principal investigator on the project.

"In a previous study, we found that transportation tends to be the number one barrier for families to access food, which impacts regaining stability and maintaining stable housing, for families who are experiencing homelessness," co-investigator Shannon Jones said.

TRANSPORTATION CHALLENGES: THEMES FROM SURVEYS AND INTERVIEWS

Overall, people using the HRCs tended to travel less once the centers were relocated. Survey respondents reported which community services (such as churches, stores, libraries, parks, pharmacies and other destinations) they used pre- and post-decentralization. **After decentralization, visits to many of these destinations declined — in some cases by as much as 40%.**

Moreover, professionals and providers reported that an increase in transportation challenges after decentralization contributed to some people who were experiencing homelessness being reluctant to travel to the resource centers, thus **decentralization resulting in more people camping unsheltered in Salt Lake City.**

Survey respondents characterized transportation as being convenient to the old resource center in downtown, due to its proximity to downtown services and amenities. One interviewee recalled being close to shopping centers and grocery stores, as well as "Pioneer Park—we could walk to there. And it's pleasant there, especially in the summertime, and they have farmer's market and stuff, it's a really nice place. Liberty Park is another one because of TRAX they have a Free Zone all the way to Fifth South or Second East."

After decentralization, some common themes were identified from the experiences clients shared:
- **Less proximity to public transit**: Findings from the GIS spatial analysis suggest that there are fewer transit stops within one mile of each HRC compared to the downtown center, and that bus service from each of the centers tends to be more accessible than light rail service.
- **No-cost shuttle is limited:** The option to use a partner agency's shuttle at no cost as an alternative to public

transit was welcome by respondents. However, participants indicated that it did not meet all their needs. As one interviewee explained, the lack of flexibility was a shortcoming: "They only take you to shelter addresses."

- **Limited availability of no-cost daily or monthly transit passes**: Obtaining the free transit passes and tokens from HRC case managers was described by participants as inconvenient and unreliable, as demand often surpassed supply. "Most of the time they're telling us they don't have anything for months. It's like, are you kidding me?... I've been trying to get them since late February," one interviewee shared.
- **Greater distance from downtown means longer times on transit:** The less centrally located shelters impact their ability to get to other places, such as medical clinics and other services that are still located downtown.
- **Challenges for persons with mobility limitations:** Participants reported how difficult it is for people with mobility limitations or other health conditions to walk to transit stops. In many cases, these challenges were worsened by increased distance to bus stops and the condition of the built environment outside of downtown.
- **Cost barriers of using public transit outside the free fare zone:** Many participants traveled less often because the resource centers are sited outside the Free Fare Zone. One interviewee explained that they no longer travel to the public library, once a frequent destination of theirs, because of the burden of paying for transit, risk of getting ticketed and subsequent negative consequences.

POLICY & PRACTICE RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the data from surveys and interviews, the research team came up with several recommendations for policymakers and practitioners to improve mobility for persons experiencing homelessness. Several of these **improve options for transportation on demand**:

- **Develop ride hailing and bike sharing programs** to address transportation challenges. Partnership programs could arrange for free or discounted rates for Uber or Lyft, and bike share programs.
- **Increase shuttle availability** through additional funding to resource centers that could support a more robust van transportation model, with more staff and vehicles.
- **Increase transit frequency while reducing cost.** As one service professional pointed out in an interview, "On lines where we know there are homeless shelters, it would be

great to have more bus routes." Another service provider said, "I think the number one thing that we could do is take away the monetary barrier associated for someone experiencing homelessness to riding the bus or to riding TRAX." While participants acknowledged the ability for some riders to get free or reduced transit UTA passes, eligibility requirements limit these programs.

Beyond the improvement of on-demand transportation options, other recommendations include:

- **Education on transportation and system navigation** such as how to use transit, free or reduced pass programs, and existing resources.
- **Increasing funding** for the operation of the resource centers so that more resources are onsite, as well as funding for transportation resources to improve client mobility.
- **Reflection and dialogue** around outcomes of the decentralization. Service providers who were interviewed emphasized the need to regularly survey HRC clients to identify their unmet needs, including transportation challenges.

Following these recommendations would benefit not only people experiencing homelessness, the researchers note, but also everyone who lives in the city. "Everybody benefits from services," said co-investigator Jeff Rose.

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THE REPORT and RESOURCES
For more details about the study, download the full report **Understanding the Mobility Impacts of Decentralizing Homeless Services in Salt Lake County, Utah** at nitc.trec.pdx.edu/research/project/1386

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