

HARRIS COUNTY COMMUNITY SERVICES DEPARTMENT

PROJECT RECOVERY POST DISASTER BUYOUT & RELOCATION PROGRAM

DETAILED UPDATE

Buyout/Acquisition Summary (data as of 5/5/23)

Buyout Area	Pct		Awaiting Offer	Updating Offer	In Eminent Domain Process	Offer Accepted, No Closing Date	Closing Scheduled	Acquired – ED	Acquired – Escrow	Total
Greens Rd MHC	1		0	0	2	0	0	0	1	3
Meadowview Land	2		1	0	2	0	0	11	2	16
Allen Fields	2		1	0	37	5	1	74	71	189
Aldine Place	2		0	0	4	0	0	6	12	22
Hahl Sites	2		0	0	5	0	0	12	9	26
Blue Bell	2		0	0	3	0	0	11	10	24
Highland Shores	3		2	3	28	1	0	45	62	141
Total			4	3	81	6	1	159	167	421

The acquisition process is nearing completion. More than 75% of buyouts are complete, and all but seven of the remaining properties are either pending closing or pending eminent domain proceedings, which can take several months to reach their conclusion in court. With closings averaging just over 21 per month for the past 12 months, CSD anticipates completing the acquisition phase of the Buyout Program by September.

Relocation: Summary of Outstanding Cases (data as of approx. 5/5/23)

Buyout Area	Pct		Pending Site Occupant Record (SOR)	Pending Offer	Pending Notice of Eligibility (NOE)	In Search of Replacement Housing	Relocated	Total
Greens Rd MHC	1		41	0	100	28	51	220
Meadowview Land	2		9	1	41	46	64	161
Allen Fields	2		4	2	15	74	48	143
Aldine Place	2		3	0	2	13	9	27
Hahl Sites	2		3	0	7	27	14	51
Blue Bell	2		0	0	4	11	9	24
Highland Shores	3		0	0	0	0	1	1
Total			60	3	169	199	196	627

Definitions:

- Site Occupant Record: HUD intake document used to determine residency that also assesses special needs/statuses (e.g., disability, veteran) and includes acquisition benefits details.
- Notice of Eligibility: Notice that must be sent to a property owner within 10 days of receipt of offer and includes details about relocation benefits.

Many of the outstanding relocation cases are expected to move along through the process without any notable delay. For the more complicated situations, delay could be due to a wide variety of factors, including dissatisfaction with the benefits amount, insufficient documents, unwillingness to engage, mortgage issues, eligibility questions, and title issues, among many others. CSD is working to collect, organize, and analyze the relocation data more closely to facilitate a more targeted

approach to case management. Additionally, CSD is implementing or soon launching several efforts to improve case management; these efforts are described in the next section below.

Program Concerns and Actions

Based on the data we have and on conversations with and other input from community members, Commissioners Court offices, program staff, and other stakeholders, CSD leadership has identified the following key concerns regarding the buyout program, as well as actions to address those concerns.

Dissatisfaction with case management

Concern

Some residents have expressed dissatisfaction regarding their interactions with buyout program case managers, and certain cases require more robust engagement than what is currently available to them. There is a need to address issues such as repeat submissions of paperwork, some residents feeling like the process is rushed while others feeling like the process takes too long, and overall concerns about whether the program provides a customer-friendly experience for residents.

Actions:

- CSD is engaging a **third-party service provider to assist with relocation** in a more hands-on, customer-friendly way.
 - Northwest Assistance Ministries (NAM) was selected through a recent procurement process for a service provider that serves communities at lower income levels that have been left out of traditional systems. NAM's staff have the cultural competence, language skills, and empathy to provide more client-centered support. They will act as the program's community liaison with a focus on Greens Road residents to assist owners and tenants to navigate the buyout program, understand the benefits available and the process involved, complete paperwork, and troubleshoot challenges.
 - Start date is expected to be in late May to coincide with the eminent domain acquisition of Greens Road Mobile Home Park.
- CSD has initiated the **Supplemental Case Management Team (SCMT)**, which is made up of staff from other County departments and offices to supplement the case management work with residents who have not yet relocated under this program.
 - The SCMT will work to ensure that full attention and assistance is given to residents who have reached a bottleneck or are otherwise dissatisfied with the case management support they are receiving. The goal of the SCMT is to improve relationships with residents in the program, enhance the CSD team's problem-solving efforts, and increase all parties' knowledge of challenges residents are facing and the feasibility of solutions to those challenges.
 - In the process, the SCMT should help all parties better understand the context of outstanding relocation cases in terms of what bottlenecks are stalling progress and driving resident dissatisfaction. The SCMT may also help to address the lack of clarity about and understanding of benefits information, which has been reported as an issue to date.
 - The initial orientation for the SCMT took place on April 12, 2023, with kickoff meetings with Case Managers happening between April 27 and May 5. Each of the nine SCMT members, who are from several different County offices and departments, have been assigned to one case to start and will likely spend 2-5 hours per week on this work to ensure the efficacy of this initiative.
 - Weekly office hours have been established for SCMT members and staff to confer, clarify requirements and processes, and make improvements. In addition, monthly check-ins with the team will be set to assess learnings and identify potential adjustments.
- To make it easier for residents to meet in person, drop off paperwork and get status updates, CSD **established a Relocation Field Office**, located at 1003 Gulf Bank #9. Hours are 1pm-5pm on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and

Friday, and 1pm-6:30pm on Thursday. The Field Office is fully equipped to provide all services available to clients at the Program's main office on the Northwest Freeway, and approximately 8 to 10 residents visit the Relocation Center each afternoon.

- CSD is **offering weekly office hours with buyout program leadership** at CSD's Northwest Office for residents to elevate their concerns and accelerate the resolution of issues that have not been solved at the Case Manager level. Since December, approximately 8 such meetings have been held. Program leaders are also available to meet with residents at the Relocation Field Office.
- We have **shifted case managers for residents who are unsatisfied** with their case management experience. The stressful nature of the buyout, the difficulty of understanding program benefits, the lengthy process to determine eligibility, and varying communication contribute to residents feeling flustered and unsatisfied. As case managers make requests for documentation and communicate difficult to convey and, consequently, to interpret information, the tension escalates. Shifting to a different case manager can help facilitate a new start and improved dynamic without sacrificing the program's knowledge base. To date, 13 cases have been reassigned at the request of residents.

Insufficient benefits for residents who are ineligible for the standard benefits

Concern

Some individuals involved in the Mandatory Buyout Program are not eligible to receive relocation benefits under [§4605\(a\) of 42 USC Ch. 61 \(Uniform Relocation Assistance and Real Property Acquisition Policies for Federal and Federally Assisted Programs\)](#). The latest estimate from the program team and other community stakeholders is that there are approximately 47 ineligible individuals who have not yet relocated.

Action

The SAFE program was established with Commissioners Court approval in 2020 to provide relocation benefits to ineligible residents involved in the Mandatory Buyout Program. SAFE originally provided \$31,000 for home replacement and \$10,000 for rental assistance. Both amounts fall far short of what other residents typically receive for these relocation benefits.

To start to address the significant gap in benefits, the CSD team increased the relocation benefits under the SAFE program as follows:

Type of assistance	Current Benefit	New Benefit	Variance
Home replacement	\$31,000	\$60,000	\$29,000
Rental assistance	\$10,000	\$36,000	\$26,000
Moving of contents	\$2,500	\$2,500	\$0
Moving of mobile home	\$12,000	\$15,000	\$3,000

To date, the SAFE program has utilized \$229,050 of Harris County funds and \$203,125 of philanthropic funds as follows:

Type	#	\$ spent (avg)	Total
Owners	15	\$17,000	\$255,000
Tenants	39	\$4,543	\$177,175
	54		\$432,175

Based on the original 2020 allocation, the SAFE program has \$1,270,950 of available funds remaining.

As communicated by CSD as part of the report transmitted to Commissioners Court for the April 4, 2023 meeting, there is already a potential shortfall related to SAFE program funding under the new benefit levels. The following table summarizes the remaining projected need to provide residents who are eligible only under the SAFE program the newly established

benefits (including “making whole,” to the extent possible, those program participants who already received the original SAFE program benefit levels):

Type	#	\$ spent (avg)	Total
Owners	34	\$55,987	\$1,903,550
Tenants	67	\$35,806	\$2,398,975
	101		\$4,302,525

Accounting for the funding need in the table immediately above, a possible \$250,000 in additional philanthropic funding, and the \$1,270,950 of available SAFE program funds remaining, the program currently is projected to have a shortfall of up to \$2,537,482. (This estimate is based on conservative modeling intended to gauge the maximum potential funding need based on currently available information.)

CSD intends to address the potential significant shortfall as follows:

- Utilize surplus CSD budget as needed through the remainder of the current fiscal year
- As needed, prepare a one-time budget request for FY2024 to fund the remaining projected amount needed to continue to provide support via SAFE program based on updated projections
- As needed, consider developing a proposal for use of ARPA Flex Fund resources for the SAFE program

Greens Road access

Context

The owner of a mobile home community at 1710 Greens Road sought and received an injunction against Harris County to keep the County from entering the property, which has been in eminent domain proceedings. The eminent domain proceedings led to the judge determining a \$21M purchase price for the property on May 3, 2023. At the conclusion of the required objection period (21 business days), CSD can begin to engage face-to-face with tenants on the property. The injunction has greatly limited the program team’s ability to inform these residents about the relocation process and benefits available.

When resolution of the eminent domain proceedings results in the Flood Control District taking possession of the property, the in-person outreach process can begin in full. Until that time (early June), the program team is engaging with those tenants who are reachable via mail or by phone, or who contact the County directly for relocation information and assistance.

Program timeline and impact on residents

Concern

As some residents successfully relocate from each of the seven Mandatory Buyout Program areas, remaining residents may be concerned that they may have to leave their current home before finding a suitable new place to live given the limited amount of affordable relocation housing available in Harris County and the finite duration of the program itself. At the same time, they may feel less safe in their current home because safety risks may increase in the buyout areas as fewer residents remain and more properties are vacated.

Actions

- The continued implementation of the case management improvements described above should help residents to find relocation housing more quickly and to better understand the program timeline, including the possibility of staying in their current home while paying rent to Harris County instead of the previous property owner for a limited time.
- Case management and other program improvements should help to move progress along so that we can close buyout sites at a quicker pace. In the meantime, CSD has been working with the Harris County Flood Control District (which controls properties acquired via eminent domain) to increase engagement with Engineering’s

Real Property Division to ensure that vacated homes are cleared quickly and with the relevant law enforcement agencies in the buyout areas to ensure that residents feel safer.

- CSD is more closely coordinating two of its disaster recovery programs to make more affordable housing available and to give Buyout Program residents first priority in purchasing the homes. CSD's Single-Family New Construction Program (SFNCP) is purchasing new build homes from developers and making them available at affordable prices to LMI households.
 - In March, the Buyout Program newsletter featured a story on the SFNCP, including photos of available homes and information on how to apply to the SFNCP. Promotion of the SFNC homes will continue in subsequent newsletters.
 - On April 20th, a Housing Fair at the Buyout Program Relocation Field Office introduced approximately 40 buyout residents to SFNCP staff, who explained the program, provided information on available homes and assisted residents in completing applications. During the first week of May, the first buyout resident was approved for a SFNCP home and the Buyout and SFNCP teams are working together to ensure a smooth relocation experience for this household.
 - A Buyout Program outreach campaign launching the week of May 15th will include information about the SFNC Program and how to access the homes it has available. This campaign will use weekly direct mail, email and/or text messages to provide Buyout Program residents with the information they need to settle into replacement homes over the summer.
- Relocations are currently projected to complete by September 2024 as residents are allowed 1 year to relocate to a replacement home after the acquisition of their buyout home.