

It's No Mystery, We Know What It Takes

By Esther Shin

What Does It Take to Move a Family Out of Poverty?

Recent research from [Opportunity Insights at Harvard University](#), highlighted by [The Atlantic](#) and [National Public Radio](#), confirms what communities have long known: families who lived in HOPE VI revitalization sites experienced improved long-term outcomes, particularly for children, largely due to increased social integration. These results were not accidental. They were the product of intentional design, policies that reconnected families to opportunity, institutions, and networks previously out of reach.

Urban Strategies, Inc.'s (USI) experience with HOPE VI, Choice Neighborhoods, and other place-based transformation initiatives across the country not only confirms these findings but extends them. Lasting economic mobility does not occur through housing alone. It emerges when physical redevelopment is paired with sustained investment in people, authentic community partnership, and coordinated systems that support families over time.

A Practice Grounded in Experience

Since 1978, USI has partnered with families, cities, housing authorities, and neighborhoods nationwide. We were founded in response to persistent lack of opportunities, public housing residents excluded from decision-making, communities normalized to disinvestment, and neighborhoods written off as unworthy of resources. Early on, we learned a critical lesson: physical revitalization without social and economic investment risks displacement rather than opportunity.

Over the past five decades, USI has partnered with local and federal agencies to secure nearly \$1 billion in federal funding, including HOPE VI, leveraging more than \$5 billion in additional public and private investment for comprehensive community development. What often begins as a housing transaction becomes something far more powerful: a national model demonstrating how low-wealth families can stabilize, participate, and thrive in mixed-income communities.

Why Schools and Families Matter

Our early work was guided by a simple hypothesis: families choose to stay in, and move to, neighborhoods with high-quality schools. Schools became our entry point for engaging families through early childhood education, after-school programming, child wellness, and food security. Over time, this work revealed a broader truth: children succeed when the adults in their communities are working, healthy, and civically engaged.

Decades of research support this conclusion. Parental employment is associated with improved child outcomes; high-quality early learning predicts adult success; and preventive health care reduces long-term costs and illness. Yet evidence alone does not remove barriers. Lack of transportation, mistrust of institutions, and fragmented systems often prevent families from accessing services. These truths guided the creation of HOPE VI. One of the first communities USI supported in St. Louis, MO served as the financial and supportive services model for the creation of the federal program.

USI's approach is rooted in partnership. We do not mandate participation. Instead, we invest in trust, honor resident leadership, and co-create strategies that reflect community priorities and lived experience.

Connection Is the Catalyst

As Raj Chetty has observed, "Just giving people cash, just giving people education, doesn't do as much as if you pair it with connections that then help them." In 2023 Opportunity Insights research found that distressed public housing developments functioned as isolated islands, while HOPE VI created bridges, physically and socially, to surrounding communities.

We agree and would go further. While redesigned streets, mixed-income housing, and connectivity matter, the supportive services funded through HOPE VI were equally essential. Without resources dedicated to community engagement, case management, and service coordination, many of these connections would not have occurred.

A Model Refined Over Time

USI's model has been refined through HOPE VI and strengthened under the Choice Neighborhoods Initiative, which expanded federal housing policy to address entire neighborhoods, not just housing sites. The results are measurable.

Across all USI communities, both that receive federal funding and those that do not, post-pandemic data show that nearly all families served have access to primary health care and health insurance. High school graduation rates approach 100 percent, exceeding the national average of 86 percent. Employment has increased by 9% and average HH income by 28 percent. Pre-pandemic data showed higher gains. Across active sites in our portfolio which benefitted from federal Choice Neighborhood funds, average household income increased by 108% collectively (from baseline). Several of our neighborhoods in San Antonio, St. Louis and Tulsa have seen between 200% to 400% increases in average income.

¹ <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/60631/410591-The-HOPE-VI-Resident-Tracking-Study.PDF>

What Works, and Why

- **Community-based, trust-driven support matters.** USI intentionally hires staff from the communities we serve. Residents possess expertise outsiders do not—knowledge of culture, timing, trust, and local dynamics. Compensating residents for this expertise keeps resources local and strengthens engagement. Lived experience is represented throughout our organization, from frontline staff to senior leadership, grounding services in reality and building trust.
- **Collaboration multiplies impact.** Outcomes improve when partners align around a shared vision. In USI communities, workforce providers, employers, health systems, schools, higher education institutions, and nonprofits collectively leveraged more than \$3 billion solely for human capital investment alongside approximately \$250 million in federal funding. These partnerships show how federal frameworks like HOPE VI and Choice Neighborhoods enable alignment rather than competition.
- **Coordinated, individualized family support is essential.** Families progress at different paces. Through proactive family support, services are aligned with readiness and goals, whether workforce training, adult education, childcare, or pathways to homeownership. Building this level of customization requires trust and long-term engagement.
- **Access to opportunity reshapes children's futures.** When families are connected to quality schools, health care, and enrichment, and supported in navigating those systems, children's trajectories change. A 2024 study by Jason Jabbari, PhD, M.Ed., Director of the Clark-Fox Policy Institute, found that Choice Neighborhoods sites with intentional school partnerships experienced improved educational outcomes, highlighting both family- and school-level effects. These findings echo lessons from the Harlem Children's Zone model.
- **Human capital investment must accompany housing redevelopment.** Addressing people and place simultaneously is not ideological, it is effective. Stable, quality housing has been identified as an important social determinant of health (Hernandez and Sugliz, 2016). Mixed-income communities supported by programs such as HOPE VI offer an opportunity to provide stable, quality housing while also addressing other important social factors that influence health.² Housing alone does not produce mobility. Federal evaluations confirm that the strongest outcomes occur when redevelopment is paired with workforce, education, and health investments.
- **Authentic community voice sustains change.** Transformation succeeds when families help define success. One Memphis resident entered a HOPE VI program unemployed and without a diploma. With coordinated support, she earned her GED, secured employment, became a homeowner, and today her children are college-bound. This outcome is not exceptional; it reflects what happens when systems work together over time.

Love, Stability, and Long-Term Investment

USI's recent work, [*Framing the Future with Love*](#), reinforces a central lesson: trust, consistency, and genuine care are structural necessities, not soft ideals. Families persist when systems are reliable, and support does not disappear when funding cycles end.

Programs like HOPE VI and Choice Neighborhoods demonstrate that comprehensive community transformation works, but only with sustained investment beyond housing. Opportunity Insights research shows these investments generate economic returns, reduce long-term public costs, and strengthen regional economies. This is not a partisan proposition; it is a practical, evidence-based strategy.

Policymakers can strengthen these results by:

- Improving access and opportunities for low-wage workers to improve economic opportunities for their families
- Protecting and strengthening the Community Reinvestment Act
- Expanding proven initiatives like Choice Neighborhoods
- Increasing investment in CDBG, HOME, and affordable housing
- Supporting CDFIs and small businesses
- Advancing state and local cross-sector partnerships

Moving families out of poverty does not require a single intervention. It requires long-term **commitment, across sectors, systems, and political lines, to invest in people with the same intentionality used to invest in infrastructure.**

Urban Strategies, Inc. is a national nonprofit founded in 1978 that partners with communities, housing authorities, and governments to advance equitable development and economic mobility. With nearly five decades of experience, USI works at the intersection of housing, education, health, and workforce development to deliver measurable outcomes for families and neighborhoods nationwide. Learn more at www.usi-inc.org.

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