

Last Days at the Radisson: As State Shelter Program Shuttters, Formerly Unhoused Residents in Oakland Brace for Next Steps

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Horace Cage stands outside of his apartment in Oakland on July 19, 2022. Cage was formerly unhoused and through Project Roomkey lived in a Radisson hotel before being placed in an apartment. (Beth LaBerge/KQED-^S

As Horace Cage tells it, the formula that got him off the streets is simple.

“I changed all my nouns,” he says, referring to his social circle. “The people I hang around, the places I go, the things I do.”

But it took him a long time. The 55-year-old Oakland native spent a little over two decades homeless or behind bars. He couch surfed and lived in his car. He settled into a tiny home encampment, then a safe RV parking site. That’s where he heard about Project Roomkey.

He was skeptical. The offer sounded a little too good to be true — his own motel room, free meals and permanent housing placement within three months — but he was trying to clean up.

He says he'd stopped using meth after an accidental fentanyl overdose almost killed him late last year, so he took a chance.



Horace Cage makes pancakes at his home in Oakland. Cage was formerly unhoused and through Project Roomkey lived in a Radisson hotel before being placed in an apartment. *(Beth LaBerge/KQED)*

He got his room at the Radisson, near the Oakland airport, in mid-February. The first thing he did was get in the shower. After relying on porta-potties and a twice weekly visit from a mobile shower truck at the RV site, having a private bathroom was a small miracle.

“I haven’t missed a day of showering since I started,” he says.

Cage joined the more than 50,000 people Project Roomkey has served across the state since April 2020, when California leaders took the unprecedented step of making motels available for use as homeless shelters early in the pandemic. Now, with funding drying up, the last remaining sites are preparing to close. That means finding a new place to live for some 6,000 people statewide who still call the motels home.

The Radisson is Alameda County’s last open site, and Cage was among the last wave of residents before it shuts down, likely by the end of August.

During his time there, Cage worked with Roomkey staff to line up all the necessary documents and applications needed to get a Section 8 voucher. By late June, he had an apartment in the Fruitvale neighborhood of Oakland.

It's a sunny one-bedroom. His dog, Little Girl, happily gnaws a bone on one of Cage's new rugs while he works on assembling his bed — “the meat and potatoes of the apartment,” as he sees it.

In his first night in the apartment he couldn't sleep, overwhelmed by the change. In the unfamiliar quiet, his mind reeled.

“You reflect on things you really didn't want to deal with, like pains that come from things you've done, things you want to do, things you should have done,” says Cage, who has been too ashamed to see his three children for years. “It all takes a toll.”

But the place has him hopeful, too. One of the first things he tacked on the wall is a Christmas stocking that had been rolling around his RV for years, waiting for a grandkid to claim its contents. Cage, who was once married, had a job as a machine operator and owned a house, is thinking about having family over for the holidays.

Transforming the system

Living on his own, with help paying rent and bills, Cage is considered a Project Roomkey success story.

“The outcomes have just been phenomenally high in terms of getting people placed into permanent housing and not seeing people exit back to the street,” says Kerry Abbott, director of the county's [Office of Homeless Care and Coordination](#).

Almost two-thirds of the 2,100 people who've left Project Roomkey in Alameda County have gone on to permanent housing, compared to less than 30% of those coming out of emergency shelters. Abbott credits the privacy of the hotels and housing resources available at the sites for enticing more people to leave the streets in the first place.

It comes with a hefty price tag. According to a county report, Roomkey costs about \$260 a night per person, while congregate shelters cost around \$50.

Statewide, the program hasn't seen the same level of success. As of February, 22% of Roomkey participants left for permanent housing, while 15% returned to the streets and 18% to unknown destinations. Another 35% exited to temporary housing or congregate shelter, while 10% have moved to institutions or other destinations.

Still, as Roomkey sunsets, Abbott says her office is carrying the program's lessons forward.

“The pandemic has permanently changed our outlook on shelter,” she says, explaining the county is looking to boost its non-congregate shelter capacity. “We're transforming our system rather than letting this really important intervention go away.”

'The devil is in the details'

For Tajanik Thompson, the prospect of a private room and bathroom sold her on Project Roomkey. Now 31, Thompson had preferred the streets to shelters since she was a teenager, choosing tents or cars over sleeping in a dorm with strangers.

Like Cage, Thompson says she was working to improve her situation when the Project Roomkey offer came up. She'd stopped doing sex work, but getting clean and addressing her mental health concerns on the streets wasn't easy "because of my environment," she says.

"I was in West Oakland," she says, "and there's nothing but drugs around there everywhere, just surrounded."



Tajanik Thompson stands outside of a former Comfort Inn that has been converted to supportive housing. (*Beth LaBerge/KQED*)

Thompson, who grew up in Oakland, was kidnapped as an adolescent and forced into sex work, according to [news reports](#). She'd lived on the streets since then, and says she's been assaulted numerous times. Between worrying about her safety and staying warm and fed, there wasn't a lot of energy for meeting with counselors, tracking down documents and all the other steps required to line up housing.

"What the hotels did is it gave stability to a population that otherwise doesn't have it," says Andrea Henson, an attorney with [East Bay Community Law Center](#) and longtime advocate for the unhoused.

Thompson says she got to be alone at the Radisson. She made a schedule for the first time in her life. She enrolled in a GED program, and started working with a therapist and a housing navigator.

“I was able to think, period,” she says. “I had peace of mind. I was able to get away from everything and everybody.”



Tajanik Thompson sits in the lobby of Project Homekey housing, a former Comfort Inn, after receiving lunch. She is living at the hotel while waiting for permanent housing. (Beth LaBerge/KQED)

“Project Roomkey is successful because so many people are supporting the residents,” Henson says, emphasizing that the support network that made the program successful extended far beyond Roomkey staff.

Thompson, for example, found herself shuffled from one Roomkey case manager to another, feeling left in the dark about her housing prospects. Then Kai Gault, an outreach specialist for Homeless Action Center, stepped in to shepherd her case.

“It’s Kai who’s actually been there for me, let me know things, given me updates,” she says.

When Thompson couldn’t get answers from her Roomkey case manager, her anxiety would spike. It often fell to Gault to sort things out and assuage Thompson’s fears, though Gault also found it difficult to contact staff.



Kai Gault, a housing navigator, sits outside of the Homeless Action Center in Oakland. (Beth LaBerge/KQED)

“My experience with Roomkey, specifically, is that some of these sites are staffed by people who aren’t proficient in helping people with disabilities — mental or physical disabilities,” Gault says. “Sometimes they don’t understand how the system truly works. I’ve had to explain how the document gathering process works, which is a pretty fundamental part of it.”

Today, Thompson is working with Gault to get ready to move into permanent supportive housing. There's an apartment designated for her, but it's in a new building that's not quite ready for her to move in yet, and Thompson is getting antsy. In the meantime, she’s moved from the Radisson to the Comfort Inn next door, a former Roomkey site now owned by the county through Project Homekey, a separate state-sponsored program that buys motels, hotels and office buildings to convert into long-term housing. But Thompson won't be sticking around.

“I’m ready to get the hell out of here,” says Thompson, who, like other Roomkey residents, has complained about moldy walls and room doors with crowbar marks from forced entries.

“There are people getting housed. They are getting off the streets and that’s amazing, that’s very needed,” Gault says. “The devil’s in the details.”

“I think overall, we did a really phenomenal job in housing as many people as we did,” says Vince Russo, who manages the Radisson for [Abode Services](#), a housing nonprofit that’s run Roomkey sites around the Bay Area. “Could some of us use more empathy in working with others? Yes.”

Russo says staff turnover has been a challenge. People who weren't performing were fired; others quit. A single case manager could be working with as many as 50 people.

He says there are still about 60 people living at the Radisson, and it's up to Russo and his team to place them in a new home. Some residents will likely end up back on the street if they refuse what is offered when the hotel closes.

"It's really going to be their choice," Russo says. "If we say, 'Look, these are the only two choices we have ... where do you want to be? Do you want to go back to the street?'"

Impossible choices

Currently, one in five people who've participated in Project Roomkey in Alameda County are either back on the streets or in a shelter, according to county data.

That includes Michael Dailey and his family, who ended up at the Radisson this spring after getting bumped from one Roomkey hotel to another. They were given choices, but it wasn't that simple.

"They offered us three different places to live, all in East Oakland, really far away from our kids' school," Dailey says.



A community garden grows outside a homeless encampment in Oakland. According to county data, one in five people who have participated in Project Roomkey in Alameda County are either in a shelter or back on the streets. (Philip Pacheco/AFP via Getty Images)

Dailey and his wife, Danielle Desjardins, have two of their three kids enrolled in elementary school in Berkeley. Commuting from the Radisson in East Oakland, especially with high gas prices, made getting the kids to school a daily struggle. They knew living out there wouldn't be sustainable.

“We couldn't get them there,” Desjardins says. “We couldn't get them to school and it made me feel like a really shitty mother that I couldn't do a better job.”

They told the Radisson staff they were desperate to live closer to the school. But they felt trapped.

“I kept saying, ‘Can we just leave? Can we still get housing assistance if we go somewhere else?’” Desjardins says. “And they would tell us that we would be on our own and we wouldn't get housing help.”

After almost two years bouncing between Roomkey sites in the East Bay, the family finally managed to get a Section 8 voucher for Berkeley with the help of a lawyer.

“The fact that it's taken them this long is really shocking,” says Brigitte Nicoletti, a lawyer with the East Bay Community Law Center who's representing the family. “It shouldn't be on this mother-of-three to badger her case manager to find her housing. It should be the other way around.”

But before the family could find an apartment, they say they got kicked out of the Radisson. They'd been trying to build a tiny home in Berkeley and hadn't been spending enough time at the hotel to keep their spot. The family stayed in their car, in their storage unit, and with Dailey's mom in Lake County.

“We also don't mind camping,” their seven-year-old daughter, Esme, pipes up. “Set up in a nice park, park our car outside and just camp. It doesn't matter.”

“At least you get to school on time every day, right?” Desjardins responds.

The Section 8 voucher doesn't guarantee that they'll find a place with a landlord who'll embrace their family of five.

“We're in a scary time of changes and uncertainty,” Desjardins says.