

community warehouse

2020 Impact Evaluation







YOUR LOCAL FURNITURE BANK

Organization and Program Overview

Program Activities

Community Warehouse (CW) is the only nonprofit furniture bank serving the upper Willamette Valley. Our mission is to redistribute donated household furnishings to neighbors in need, creating stronger homes and brighter futures for all. Annually, 7,700 clients access CW to pick out the essential items they need to turn their empty houses into comfy homes. Clients include people transitioning from crises such as homelessness, domestic violence, and incarceration.

Each year, more than 250 organizations (nonprofits, government agencies, hospitals, schools, churches, and community centers) refer clients to CW. 85% of clients are referred through a partner agency. In these cases, advocates schedule appointments for their clients, accompany them to pick out furniture, and arrange transportation of the items to their homes. 15% of clients are self-referred; they are served through our Client Services Coordinator. These clients work directly with the Client Services Coordinator to schedule their appointments and arrange transportation.

In both cases, Community Warehouse's involvement with clients is very short. Typically, clients meet CW staff for the first time at their 1-hour appointment. Often we do not receive contact information for the clients, as the appointments are scheduled through their case manager. In many situations, anonymity is important. Because of this, historically we have not followed up with clients after their appointments. While this ensures our process is simpler, reducing administrative costs for CW staff and case managers, it has meant that we were unable to track the long-term impact of furnishings on the lives of our clients.

The Board and leadership staff of CW committed to conducting a program impact evaluation as part of our 2018-2022 Strategic Plan. Our goals were threefold: 1) to prove program impact, 2) to improve program services and impact, and 3) to improve our system of program evaluation.

**We wish to thank Meyer Memorial Trust
for supporting our research and this report.**



Evaluation Methodology

After a careful selection process, Community Warehouse contracted with Dialogues in Action to guide the organization through this evaluation. Dr. Steve Patty of Dialogues in Action is a teacher, consultant, author, and well-known expert in the field of developmental evaluation.

The aim of our evaluation was to see the kind and quality of impact we are having in the population we are serving. Over the course of the project, we (a) developed and refined our ideas of intended impact and indicators, (b) designed and implemented both qualitative and quantitative means to collect and analyze data, and (c) identified findings and considered the implications of those findings for program adjustments and renovations.

This project began with a focus on identifying and clarifying the intended impact of Community Warehouse's furniture bank program. Once the impacts were developed and indicators were identified, we developed an in-depth interview protocol to collect qualitative data, and designed a survey to collect data about quantitative measures. We analyzed the data, identified themes, and coalesced the themes into findings. From the findings, we developed program responses and communication.

Intended Impacts

1. Clients experience relief, dignity, and a sense of well-being.
2. Clients participate & integrate in their community.
3. Clients turn their focus toward future goals.
4. Clients adopt valued customs and traditions.
5. Clients pursue healthy, productive lives.

Note: While we believe furniture banks support housing retention, we chose to test more primary or direct impacts of receiving furniture in this evaluation.

Qualitative Data and Analysis

For the qualitative portion of the evaluation, we designed an in-depth interview protocol to collect data about the structural, qualitative changes resulting from our program. We identified a sample of subjects using a purposeful stratified technique to select a representation of the population we served.

Community Warehouse currently serves 7,700 people annually. We determined a target goal of interviewing 100 former clients that accessed CW in the prior 6-24 months (1% of our service population). We identified our top 15 referring partners and contacted case managers from each, asking to connect with their clients who fit this criteria. Since CW serves a wide variety of recipients, we addressed our priorities to ensure a diverse pool of interviewees:

- Family composition (individual, family with children, childless couple)
- Gender (female, male, other)
- Race (white, non-white, mixed race)
- Presenting situation/referring agency (homeless, refugee/immigrant, domestic violence, veteran, disability, mental health, substance abuse)
- Referral category (referred with case manager, self-referred with the Client Services Coordinator)
- Warehouse location (Portland or Tualatin)

We then convened one-on-one interviews lasting between 45-90 minutes, with both staff and volunteer interviewers who were trained in best practices for qualitative interview techniques. We applied a four-step model of textual analysis to each of the interviews. This process allowed us to interpret the meaning and significance of the interview data. We then examined the overarching themes that emerged and identified primary insights and discoveries.

Quantitative Data and Analysis

For the quantitative portion of the evaluation, we designed a questionnaire to collect data on our quantitative indicators of impact. We sent the questionnaire to case managers with the request to ask their clients who had accessed CW in the prior 6-24 months to take the survey. Our response rate was 54 individuals. The data were analyzed primarily using measures of central tendency.

Our evaluation produced findings from the combination of our qualitative and quantitative instruments. The most significant findings follow.

Limitations

Our team recognized several limitations and unintended consequences that may limit the accuracy, generalizability, or transferability of our report.

First, we interviewed clients served between 6-24 months prior to the study. We chose this timeframe for two main reasons: we wanted to allow enough time for clients to experience the impact of having furnishings, and we wanted to interview clients who would remember the furnishings they chose and their CW experience. The timeframe met these goals. Nevertheless, it may also represent a limitation of the study because we only have data from one 18-month snapshot in time.

Second, we discovered through the process of contacting partner agencies and clients served by the Client Services Coordinator that it was more difficult to reach clients through a third party. Therefore, the report displays an overrepresentation of clients served the Client Services Coordinator (they represent 15% of total CW clients but 25% of interviewees). Some of our regular referring agencies did not respond to our interview requests, so there is a lack of representation from partner agencies compared to our original expectations.

Third, the qualitative and quantitative interviews had language limitations. We were only able to provide interviews in English or Spanish (two members of our interview team were Spanish speakers). We created two different scripts for interviews in Spanish (one for a native Spanish-speaking interviewer and one for a fluent, Spanish-as-a-second-language interviewer), so there may have been nuances in the questions based on how they were asked and how the answers were translated. Since we were unable to accommodate interviews in other languages, clients who primarily speak another language may not have been able to communicate their responses as thoroughly.



Findings

The following findings are in order by timing rather than importance: from the impacts of the appointment to the immediate post-appointment to the long-term impacts, and finally the findings that were not as we expected.

A. The Community Warehouse Experience

Finding #1: Kindness for someone like me

Key Insight. The Community Warehouse experience made people feel valued. The positivity and kindness experienced at CW influenced clients' feelings about the community at large.

Description of the finding. Many interviewees volunteered that their CW appointment was a very positive experience. They praised staff members, appreciated the environment, and overall felt cared for by the organization. Beyond that, our clients felt like they had asked for help and got a positive response. A common theme among interviewees was that it took humility to ask for help in the first place: *"I was afraid they'd look down on me and judge me when I came to get a hand out,"* and *"I could not believe someone would help a person like me."* It was difficult to put aside their sense of pride and stigma about receiving assistance. Yet when they got to CW, they felt respected and valued:

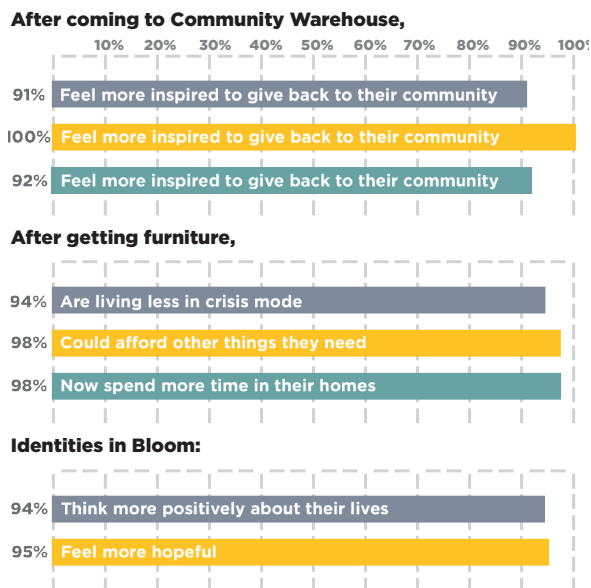
"It was a humbling experience. But it also showed me that I can be a person."

"I expected it to be harder but you made it easy. You made it a joy knowing that I can get some furniture and beds for these boys and they're going to be okay. We are all going to be okay."

Clients also praised the Community Warehouse delivery service. They had been worried beforehand about how they would get their new furniture home. Learning about our delivery service was a great relief. A number of interviewees mentioned that the care and respect shown by our drivers and movers was an important and rewarding part of their CW experience.

For many participants, the Community Warehouse experience gave them faith in the greater community. Clients expressed, *"I'm more receptive to receive help from others,"* and *"I got more of a sense that there are good people around."* Another explained, *"I didn't think that anyone in Oregon cared, but now I know there's this organization. I tell everybody about the Warehouse."* 100% of survey respondents felt more aware that people are looking out for them, and 92% of respondents agreed they are now more likely to ask for help if they need it.

Significance. The data suggest that CW's policies, procedures, and individual interactions affect how clients feel about the community as a whole. This is important to keep in mind, as staff members and volunteers are responsible for how clients are treated and how our Warehouses look and feel day to day.



From taking out the trash to our music choices, clients are affected by the environment we cultivate. Coming from a trauma-informed perspective is key to making our clients feel welcomed, respected, and accepted. We should promote the concept that meeting people's requests for help with kindness and openness will cultivate the idea that asking for help is acceptable and safe.

Finding #2: The power of choice

Key Insight. Allowing clients to choose their own furniture is a key factor in Community Warehouse's lasting impact.

Description of the finding. The data revealed that choosing one's own furniture was a vital component of the process at CW. By having the opportunity to make personal choices about their home, clients were able to express their preferences and needs. The process provided a sense of dignity and agency. As one participant claimed, "Getting to pick out your own furniture for yourself, the stuff you want, makes you feel like you gain a little control or autonomy that you've lost. It's much better than having people just give you things." Choosing their own furnishings helped clients feel proud of their homes. They felt a sense of ownership that was empowering and motivating. The result was often an enthusiastic drive to continue improving their living spaces.

We also heard from clients who wish they could come back. Sometimes it was because the experience was overwhelming the first time. Others missed out because the Warehouse was out of a certain item at the time: "I wasn't able to get a couch, that worries me a little. I wonder if I can go back and get one, but who do I ask?"

Significance. Our clients have personal preferences and individual needs. Giving choice is an essential part of respecting their dignity and life experience. This study reveals that allowing clients to choose their own furnishings is an important program feature with lasting impact. Moreover, consistent inventory is an issue, and the data corroborate that clients often do not get everything they want or need. Having consistent inventory is an important part of ensuring choice for our clients.

Finding #3: Paying it forward

Key insight. Community Warehouse inspires people to "pay it forward" and "give back" to support the community.

Description of the finding. Interviewees described being inspired by the way we model our service. For many clients, the impact was a desire to support others in need. **91% of survey respondents responded affirmatively that they feel more inspired to give back to their community.**

Respondents varied in their ideas for "giving back." Some are volunteering or planning to volunteer. Others are telling people about CW, while still others are planning to donate items back or pass them along to others. Some participants are considering careers in social service, inspired by their experience at CW. For one interviewee, having a stable home has made it easier to be an advocate and to lobby city and state governments for the rights of people experiencing homelessness. So many clients described how this experience gave them a deep desire to help others:

"I dream about giving back. When I get new things, I give my old stuff to others who don't have anything. I talk to people at work about the Warehouse. I know where I can donate things in the future. I've always been a giver, but I like that I can tell my story to others who've been homeless by telling them about the Warehouse."

"It's going to change the way that I help others. I need to get to a point where I'm not experiencing some of those triggers. I'm working on that. But I've received so much warmth and assistance, and I want to give back. At Christmas, my daughter and I packed up and handed out food to the homeless in Portland with a couple of friends. I want to do that every year."

Whether or not they have "always been a giver", the experience of being helped and feeling worthy has inspired former clients to do good for others: *"It has made me believe that there are a lot of good people out there. I am not having to do it all myself. All these people I don't even know were helping me. And I want to be able to help others too."*

It was touching to hear how many clients specifically wanted to help Community Warehouse and saw themselves as important parts of our organization. Not only were they telling others about the Warehouse or donating items, but some clients were stopping by just to see how things are going. One participant has suggestions for us on how to store couches. He notes that "space seems to be an issue."

Significance. This finding feels particularly profound. We often talk about how rewarding reciprocal giving is and how the power of neighbors coming together fulfills a tangible need. This finding is evidence that there is something more than furniture that is being transmitted through our service - there's communal action.

B. Immediate impact

Finding #4: Physical comfort and mental relief

Key insight: Clients feel a sense of relief from having the furnished home they need.

Description of the finding. Remember that "ahhh" feeling when you sink onto your couch after a long day? This sense of comfort and relief was a consistent theme echoed by participants. **94% of survey participants agreed that they are living less in crisis mode.**

Physical comfort was consistently addressed by participants. One client spoke about his and his wife's experience in their house before getting furniture: *"Sleeping on the floor was hard on our old bones."* Another client explained: *"I feel more comfortable now, having a bed after sleeping on the floor for years."*

A grandmother spoke about the mental well-being of her young grandchildren who live with her full-time: *"Even when things aren't going their way and they are having a really hard day, they have a room and bed to go to. They are actually have a space to call their own."* Another client spoke about the relief she felt after receiving furniture: *"When I didn't have anything I thought I'd have to start all over on my own and get everything myself, before I heard about you guys. It was a lot of pressure to pay rent and do child care. It relieved my stress to get furniture - I cried for a few days."*

Numerous participants experienced a sense of peace after receiving furniture from Community Warehouse: *“Mentally, I’m at peace a little more. I’m more comfortable. I can take a minute to think and work on myself. I don’t have to worry. Furniture does have an impact to help me improve my mental health. It makes me want to do better and progress.”*

Significance. In Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs, one cannot focus on psychological or self-fulfillment needs until one’s basic needs are met. This study substantiates that furniture is one of these basic needs. Once comfort is established (providing peace of mind, rest, security, etc.), participants could focus on higher-level needs, like showing up for others, giving back, and planning for the future. Furniture had an immediate effect on physical comfort and mental relaxation, providing a foundation for participants to fulfill other unmet needs.

Finding #5: Bottom line value

Key insight. Community Warehouse provides an economic opportunity for people to use their money for other needs and/or to save for the future.

Description of the finding. People who received furniture from the Warehouse were keenly aware of the money they saved by not having to purchase furniture. They appreciated the economic value of quality furniture. **98% of survey respondents agreed that getting furniture helped them afford other things they need.**

Multiple interviewees connected the economic opportunity to increased self-sufficiency. They felt an increased ability to focus on other goals, including reducing the need for public assistance and opening a savings account. This helped stress levels significantly as clients moved from concentrating on furniture to accomplishing their short-term and long-term objectives.



“I might only have \$50 to spend on clothes [for my daughter], but because I have a couch, I don’t have to put that money into saving up for the couch.”

“My goals were getting an apartment and providing for my daughter financially, getting on my feet and off of assistance. Furniture was a huge financial burden, so that helped me to be able to meet those goals. They didn’t change, but I was able to get the stability to achieve my goals.”

Significance. This finding fits within a larger theme of improved self-sufficiency. After a house, a car, and college, furniture is the most expensive thing that Americans will pay for in their lifetime (Business Insider, 2019). For many clients, furniture may be the most expensive thing they will ever purchase. CW is removing a huge financial burden by providing furniture at no cost. (Typically, partner agencies pay access fees for their clients. If a client must pay their own access fee, the cost is \$60, and CW maintains a fund to cover costs for clients who cannot afford this fee.) It is significant that finances are freed up when a client isn’t spending resources on basic furniture. The money saved can further personal goals of self-care, sustain a healthier lifestyle, provide greater independence and choice, or support family.

Finding #6: Helping with health

Key insight. Chronic poor health consumes an inordinate amount of time, energy, and resources, all of which are finite. Furniture definitely helps, though it can only help so much.

Description of the finding. Several clients in our study were suffering from serious ailments, so CW was not a major player in their health recovery. In essence, some problems are larger than furniture. Nevertheless, having a place with appropriate furnishings enabled recovery at home, assisted in progressive wellness care, and supported healthier living. Clients pointed out that when living with critical health issues, it was impactful to have a furnished home where service providers can visit, tools to cook healthier meals, and a bed or a recliner to ease physical issues.

These factors made a difference in participants' outlook and ability to take care of themselves. For a client who was tethered to her oxygen tank, not being around smokers in communal housing or shelters makes a difference in how she feels daily. *"I'm glad I can be on my own, there's something good about having privacy when I want it and no one smoking around me."* For another whose bed had bedbugs, *"With my health being what it is, having a chair and bed of my own (clean, no bugs!) makes a difference. I'm real sick with bad liver and pain every day. Life is hard but I manage and don't give up."* An elderly man had been living in a shed and now has a chair to rest his swollen legs. Another client explained, laughing, how CW impacted her well-being: *"To be honest - I got lazier. Because my bed is TOO comfortable! My health is much better than where it was before."*



Significance. A chair, a bug-free bed, a set of pans, furniture delivered by positive people, and living in a furnished home all provide comfort and dignity. For some, this helped supply the energy to address ongoing health issues. For others, the health challenges they faced were too great to be overcome by furniture alone. Especially for clients with severe or multiple health issues, *"this is as good as it gets."*

Beds were particularly impactful because sleep enables physical and mental health. Good sleep can improve decision making, stress management, immune system functioning, and an endless list of other health benefits. From young students who need sleep to succeed to elderly folks who need to rest and heal, providing people with clean, quality beds is a huge impact of CW. Mattresses are consistently one of our most-needed items, and they come and go quickly. It is important for us to keep in mind that they contribute to one of the main impacts of our program.

C. The Importance of Place

Finding #7: It's not just a table

Key insight. Furniture means more than just the items themselves. It empowers clients by providing a place to eat, play, work, connect, and make personal choices.

Description of the finding. Clients reported that their furnishings had significance beyond their physical characteristics. For a student with a desk, “Now I can study at home and not spend all my time looking for a quiet place to get my work done.” A client with chairs and a bed could have therapists visit his home, instead of relying on rides and missing appointments. A mom could now have babysitters, something she never would have considered without furniture. For so many clients, a mattress gave the gift of sleep, preparing them to face the stressors that come their way. Many participants explained how furnishings meant they had choices related to food. Having proper cookware and dishes enabled clients to provide home-cooked meals for their families. Families were able to make memories and experience eating dinner together at a table. Dishes, pots and pans, and silverware meant they could cook and eat what they wanted when they wanted it: “There is no longer a need to be a hunter-gatherer, spending all my time eating whatever I could find because I didn't know when I'd find my next meal. Now I can eat regular. That's a BIG deal!”

Clients who had experienced an empty house before receiving furnishings stated that their house didn't feel like home until it was furnished. As one client poignantly put it: “An empty house feels cold even if you have a heater on. When you have furniture, it's warm and inviting, and that is what I want my family to feel.” **98% of survey respondents now spend more time in their home.**

The significance of a furnished place was hard to overstate. For a grandmother: “The furniture has made a big difference in our home and how we experience our home.” And for a mother: “I got my children back because now we have a place for us all.”

Significance. Having appropriate furnishings made a difference on so many levels. Clients expressed how their house didn't provide the feeling of “home” until it was furnished, and are now more likely to spend time there. Whether in the kitchen, bedroom or living room, furnishings allowed clients to exercise agency and choice. This was true in what may seem like small ways - choosing food and mealtime, and in big ways - being able to have one's children and family together. For our clients, furnishings provided so much more than merely filling an empty space.



Finding #8: Everything in its place

Key insight: Furnishings allow clients to organize their belongings, relieving stress and frustration of not having a place for important possessions, and adding to peace of mind and a sense of normalcy. Being able to put your belongings away is an essential element of feeling that you have control and ownership of your space.

Description of the finding. Many respondents highlighted organization of their belongings as central to their sense of home. Many people connected their appreciation for organization to the period of time when they couldn't - when they lacked both possessions and a way to organize what little they had. Many called out organization, being able to decide where something goes and where you'll find it, as something that most take for granted:

"The freedom to pull a book off of a shelf to read to my daughter. This is something your average person doesn't understand, who's never been through something like this [homelessness], how those little things are so important."

"The Warehouse gave me shelving, a dresser, so my stuff isn't in bags. I have a shelf for my towels in my bathroom.... I can take a shower and have a towel waiting right there for me. I can have things organized. It has brought balance to my life."



Some interviewees expressed that while being able to organize and put away their belongings is novel, they were struggling to establish themselves in their homes because organization is difficult. Respondents who experienced homelessness (on the streets or camping) for extended periods expressed some ambivalence about organizing their belongings. One respondent suggested that Community Warehouse expand services to offer support to those transitioning from homelessness on how to furnish, decorate, and organize their homes: *"Thankful to have the shelves from you. I have a place to put things.... But I still haven't really settled. I'm not great with organization. It's pretty different when you're used to living out of a suitcase."*

Significance. Once again, we saw that furnishings took on much greater meaning than the wood and fabric they were built with. A bookshelf gave freedom, and a shelf in the bathroom enabled dignity and balance. Having the tools to keep a home well organized made clients feel settled and allowed for personal agency. And yet, not everyone was able to take advantage of these tools. Offering resources to help people organize could be a meaningful next step.

D. Identities in Bloom

Finding #9: “A regular, real person”

Key insight. Furnished homes make people feel normal and part of society.

Description of the finding. The data showed that having furniture helped restore clients’ sense of dignity. One study participant who endured severe conditions while confined to a backyard shed for 14 months now says he feels like a “regular, real person.” Others stated that they “feel like I have a value” or “feel lucky.” One client said that he felt human again. This shift from feeling worthless to worthy was palpable in so many interviews. “You feel POOR without furniture,” one participant said. Having furniture clearly made clients feel like they are “part of society” and “legit.”

Clients felt that, with a furnished home, their place among others has changed. One participant who was emerging from long-term domestic violence described the experience of getting furniture from Community Warehouse as the “beginning step of not feeling like a loser.” Having furniture “says you are going to be OK.”

Participants also expressed how they can now do so many things that “regular” people do, thanks to their furniture: have family and friends over, provide safe spaces for children, cook their own meals, and more. The furniture helped clients feel human again, with a brighter future ahead.

“I knew from the moment I got furniture that I was moving forward. I am so grateful for the opportunity and it really motivated me.”

“I don’t feel as embarrassed. I don’t feel demeaned anymore.”

Significance. While an empty apartment gives people a safe space, the furnishings add symbolic as well as practical value. Consider a person’s feelings of shame or lack of self-esteem from living in an empty home. A parent feeling depressed, anxious, or overwhelmed is less capable of responding to the emotional needs of their children. Children suffer from the stigma of having an empty home when their peers do not. With a comfortable, furnished home, people can regain a semblance of “normal,” which is so critical after crises such as domestic violence or homelessness. They can feel more confident about themselves as a person functioning in society.

Finding #10: Becoming somebody for someone

Key insight. Having a furnished home helps to establish or reestablish family and community ties, and creates a sense of belonging in the place you live.

Description of the finding. In many of our interviews, clients told stories of establishing or reestablishing a meaningful role in their family. One mom felt like a real parent because her kids now have appropriate places to play and sleep: “I have a table where we can eat meals, where the kids can do their homework.” She shared a newfound calm: “I feel complete now; I’m a good parent.”

Furniture helped with family bonds for our older clients too. For one man, having a furnished home meant he could switch roles and become a caretaker for his sick mother. The fact that he had a gathering space and a couch to sit on helped his mom escape the stress of her disease. Another

participant was able to become the legal guardian for her grandchildren she had never met before establishing a stable home. Having additional beds and a couch allowed her to create routines and establish trust for this brand new relationship. *“I was able to bring the boys into a place where they feel good. It was a little scary for them because they didn’t know me... Coming in to a nice, clean, good-looking place... They are getting used to me now.”*

Many of our clients began to see a role for themselves in the community. One Native American participant was able to recognize themselves as *“an elder,”* with wisdom to impart. Another man, once his apartment was set up nicely, sat on his front stoop every day and saw himself as an important fixture in the community. He even started a community garden, leading his neighborhood in the effort. *“When you retire, you have nothing to do,”* he said, *“and when you are homeless, you feel out of the crowd. But now I feel back in.”*

Clients found that furniture empowered them to be a participating member in the community on their own terms. Clients felt more comfortable in their homes to build relationships with others: *“I’m not really a huge talker unless we have a connection. That’s how all of my family is. Having furniture helps us have a connection.”*

Significance. When a person does not have housing or when their housing situation is deemed inadequate, family relationships often suffer or break. The person is not able to play a positive role in the family and can be seen - both by themselves and by others - as incapable or unworthy. The data show how furnishings provided both practical tools and the self-respect for clients to play a role in their family. They were able to adopt and be proud of their identity - as an elder, a parent, a caregiver, and overall as a person who belongs - an important somebody for someone. This integration or reintegration into a family provides critical support and motivation, helping our clients move ahead with their lives.

Finding #11: Doing more

Key insight. For many clients, getting furniture and household items from Community Warehouse enabled them to do more. They were able to shift from negative situations or mindsets to positive activities and lifestyles.

Description of the finding. CW enabled a positive pivot in clients’ lives: from being alone to being the guardian of grandchildren; from needing care to caring for an ailing parent; from being an outcast to being an involved community member. CW helped clients get into a space where they were able and wanting to do more for themselves and their community. One example came from a participant who had been a bartender for 53 years. He was a social person, but saw his community links disintegrate in his three years of houselessness. With Community Warehouse’s help, he pivoted from being frustrated and alone to being active in his community. He now has the capacity and motivation to do more, which helps him recover from trauma. Furnishings helped another client transition from depression to finding strength and purpose: *“My future was meek and bleak. Lots of*



thoughts of hurt and wanting to die. It was so humbling; I lost everything - car, home, had to put stuff in storage, had to sell a lot of furniture - I had a lot of losses. I was staying with my daughter's friends on their couches. I finally got my own bed, that was it. Now I don't have the desire to not want to wake up. It gives me a desire to help others, to find the strength within."

For some, getting furniture prevented a downward spiral. One client got a new mattress so he could heal from surgery at home. Without it, he would have been in limbo; his old mattress had bedbugs. Another client, a student, was having trouble concentrating at the library. CW gave him a desk and chair, enabling him to study at home and do better in school.

Clients described how having a furnished home allowed them to think about the future instead of worrying about today: one young client was considering going back to school; several interviewees spoke about wanting to buy a house; another wanted to adopt his nephew; a young mom was planning to go to nursing school after her child turned three. As one client put it: *"Now when you have somewhere to sit, somewhere to sleep, you can take the next step and start working toward longer-term goals. Going back to school. Having a career. I wasn't able to think about any of those goals without Community Warehouse."*

Significance. We often think about clients with dramatic stories - coming out of homelessness, domestic violence, illness, natural disaster, or war. For those clients, having a furnished home allows them to focus on positive roles and dreams. The data show that there is another group of clients whose stories may not be as dramatic, but who still need our help. CW enables these people to maintain stability and make seemingly small changes that are no less critical and transformative. Getting furniture can enable "doing more" in many ways: supporting others, taking the next step in one's health or career, or giving back to the community.

Finding #12: "Strong, proud, and capable"

Key insight. Community Warehouse helps clients get to a place where they can express their natural strengths and talents.

Description of the finding. Throughout this study, clients demonstrated strong, positive traits — for leadership, resilience, artistic ability, goal-orientation, resourcefulness, persistence, and more. Community Warehouse didn't teach these traits; however, with a furnished home, our clients were now able to express their qualities in myriad ways. As one client said: *"Community Warehouse gave me good foundations, but I am able to take these foundations and add to it."* In a very literal example, a woman had carried her paint set and art supplies throughout her time being homeless. Once she and her husband got furniture in their apartment, she painted the chairs, picture frames, and lampshades. This woman had long been an artist; our services helped her express herself in her home. Another client talked about ways she used to give back to her community before going through her tough situation. CW helped get her to a space where she can participate again - through social work, volunteering, and being more involved with her daughter and grandson.

As an interviewee pointed out, all of our clients must be persistent and resourceful to some degree. Just to have gotten to Community Warehouse, she explained, our clients had to have figured

out how to ask for help, advocate for themselves, work with case managers, and navigate a very complex social service system. *“Once you get your foot in the door (into the social service pipeline), then you have to find other doors. It’s like a merry go round: you fill out forms, then they give you a list of other resources. Then you go, you fill out forms, then they give you a list of other resources. You go round and round until you want to hurl.”*

In that same vein, another participant wanted us to know: *“Community Warehouse didn’t save me.”* She noted, *“I’ve always been the person who has all the referrals and information. That is how I’ve always been involved and that is what’s important to me.”* For her, as for so many clients, the furniture helped them move on with their lives, express themselves, and show up for others, but it didn’t change who they were. If someone was showing leadership after receiving furniture, that person had probably always been a leader.

Significance. Community Warehouse is one part of a larger social service system. The fact that our clients got to us means they were able to navigate that system, demonstrating their strength and resilience. Our service and our communication needs to honor that strength and resilience, as well as the pride that often makes it difficult to ask for help.



Finding #13: Positivity

Key Insight. Furnished homes give people a more positive outlook about their lives.

Description of the Finding. Shifting to a more positive mindset after receiving furniture was a consistent finding that came through the qualitative and quantitative interviews. **94% of survey respondents agreed that they now think more positively about their lives, and 95% feel more hopeful.**

“The furniture has made a big difference in our home and how we experience our home. It’s always a good feeling when anyone comes to your home and it comes nice and it looks great. Yes, it does help me feel happier and more settled. It is joyful when someone comes in your home and it looks nice and the furniture, the pictures in the kids room, it brings joy to all of us actually.”

“You know, when you don’t have furniture or anything, you get depressed. It really lifted my spirits, and my husband’s spirits.”

One couple spoke about how their priorities have shifted - from having it all to just being happy. For them, furniture was a reminder to appreciate what they have, even though they didn’t get everything they wanted during their CW appointment.

Significance. Our interviewers were struck by how positive clients’ outlooks and mindsets were overall, especially considering some of the incredibly difficult situations they had experienced. Furniture is a tangible reminder of community support, normalcy, and comfort, bringing a more positive outlook to clients’ lives.

E. Not As Expected

Finding #14: Cultural connections and traditions

Key insight. Although culturally-specific items may be important to CW clients, the data suggest that CW services do not deepen clients' connection to their heritage.

Description of the finding. Community Warehouse values the importance of providing culturally-specific items. One of our intended impacts was the following: “Clients adopt valued customs and traditions.” We wanted to test if, after receiving furniture from CW, clients would feel more connected to their cultural heritage or family traditions, immerse themselves further in their culture, or develop stronger family bonds through cooking or spending time together at home.

While the data suggested that receiving furniture positively impacted clients' family and community bonds, most clients did not associate receiving furniture with stronger immersion or connection with cultural traditions. Only 27% of clients surveyed felt very strongly that they are better able to express themselves and their culture in their home, and 27% strongly agreed that they do more things with people of their culture.

Significance. We concluded that furniture does not seem to significantly impact whether clients will deepen existing cultural traditions, beliefs, or practices. Rather, furniture enabled personal expression and practices of family traditions. We will continue to review and challenge what we consider “essential items” in order to reflect the furniture needs of diverse communities, but should not assume that these items will significantly influence the cultural traditions of clients who select them.

Finding #15: “Living one day at a time”

Key insight. Furniture allowed clients to be comfortable in the present, though that did not necessarily mean they were able to plan for the future.

Description of the finding. We tested the intended impact: “Clients turn their focus toward future goals.” While this rang true for some clients in our study, this was not the case for others. Only 21% of survey respondents answered very strongly that they are better able to make plans for their future. In qualitative interviews, some clients shared more immediate goals when asked about their future: “put up the wallpaper” and “upgrading my stuff.”

Many explained how their experience with traumatic situations such as chronic homelessness caused their focus to shift to the present. Some openly shared their fears of letting themselves dream for the future: “It's really just having enough - being comfortable. You don't think that far ahead. There's a phobia of losing it all. It could happen to anyone, anytime. It's just month to month - hey, we're ok this month.”

Age appeared to be a factor in whether participants were focused on goals for their future or focused on their present comfort and happiness. This was revealed in interviews with older clients: “I don't have any desires other than to be comfortable and at peace. I don't have goals of doing things or having more things, I may have when I was younger, I've done all of those things already.”

Significance. Through these responses, we recognized a bias in our development of this intended impact. We had elevated the importance of planning for the future. However, staying connected to the present is a positive tool to recover from trauma/PTSD. In the case of one couple, after the death of their child and a subsequent fire that decimated their home, taking things one day at a time and focusing on their immediate needs kept them going. Others, particularly elders, were content to center on their present comfort and happiness. Overall, while some clients were able to focus on their future after receiving furniture from CW, there were other factors at play associated with creating a more stable home environment.

Steps Forward

In response to the findings above, our team determined which ideas from our set of adjustments and experiments we intend to implement.

Response 1: Inventory Improvements

Point Person: Leadership Team

Reassess our inventory with an eye to: 1) what we do and don't carry, 2) what we prioritize, 3) what makes people feel "normal" at home, and 4) what makes a difference for people experiencing health challenges. Our goal is to ensure we have enough of the right items so clients have the opportunity to choose. Additionally, we must ensure that quality mattresses are available at all times.

Response 2: Intentional Service

Point Person: Program Director

Reinforce the importance of providing intentional, caring service to every client by serving no more than two client families per hour. This will ensure clients do not feel rushed or that there is not enough to go around, and ensure our staff can take time with each family.

Response 3: Positive Experience

Point Person: Program Director

Reinforce the positivity of the Community Warehouse experience and acknowledge the leadership and strength that people have demonstrated just to get this far. This may include a volunteer greeter position and signage to welcome people into our Warehouses, as well as messaging on the client services page of our website. This may include a greeter position to welcome people to our Warehouses, messaging on the client services page of our website, and mission-focused signage and messaging.

Response 5: Additional Resources

Point Person: Executive Director

Create a resource page for connecting clients with mentors for next steps (organizing, financial planning, etc.).

Response 6: Return Visits

Point Person: Program Director

Currently, return visits for clients are left to the discretion of each organization that refers clients to the Warehouse. However, there are many situations that would justify a return visit. We will update our practices by adjusting case manager orientation materials and appointment communications in order to normalize return visits as needed.

Response 7: Follow Up

Point Person: Program Team

Program Coordinators/Managers will collect client information and follow up within one year for those who opt in (provide resources, ask questions related to program evaluation, and provide opportunities to volunteer).

Response 8: Mission Moments

Point Person: Program Director and Communications Director

Program staff members will share client interactions at Board and All-Staff meetings to reinforce positive “mission moments”.

Response 9: Integrate Evaluation into Program

Point Person: Leadership Team

Develop 3-5 year strategic plan around evaluation outcomes. Upgrade intended impacts, informed by the findings, and develop regular data collection and evaluation practices that align with Community Warehouse’s operations.

Appendices *(view online at communitywarehouse.org/resources)*

- A. Indicators of Impact
- B. Principles of Change
- C. Qualitative Interview Protocol
- D. Quantitative Questionnaire



