

Report: Section 8 housing process for applicants

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Background

At a national level, government-subsidized housing is provided through Section 8 of the 1973 Housing Act through the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Locally, Pittsburgh residents can apply for affordable housing through the Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh (HACP). Numerous programs exist for individuals and families looking for affordable housing, the most common being the Housing Choice Voucher program, which is tenant-based, and the Project-Based Housing Voucher program, which is unit-based.

The Public Housing (PH) Program was established by the U.S. Housing Act of 1937 to provide decent, safe and sanitary housing for low-income families, elderly, and persons with disabilities. The ACHA owns and operates Public Housing complexes throughout Allegheny County, consisting of high-rise apartments, walk-up apartments, townhouse apartments, and single-family homes. The ACHA receives federal funding subsidies and program participants pay rent based on income.

The Housing Choice Voucher (HCV) Program, the nation's largest rental assistance program, helps low-income families, the elderly and the disabled rent decent, safe and sanitary housing units in the private market. The HCV program was designed to expand housing choices for low-income families by allowing them to search for rental housing in the private market. Once a low-income family is invited to participate in the program, the HACP issues that family a housing voucher. The voucher identifies the size of unit the family qualifies for, as well as the maximum amount of monthly rent the family can afford to pay.

Housing process (Background)

All applications are accepted electronically **online**, one must be constantly checking the website in order to see which individual places open up their applications.

Once applications are open, one can apply any time during that two-week window. Since all applicants are placed on the waiting list, it makes no difference if you are the first or last person to submit an application. Everyone has the same chance of being selected for the waiting list.

If at the time of eligibility interview they find debt towards the HACP, individual will be denied and the application will be removed from the waiting list. People are given 15 days after their denial letter is mailed to either grieve the validity of the debtor or to pay the debt in full. If they grieve the validity of the debt owed to HACP and lose the grievance, the application will be permanently denied and the applicant will be removed from the waiting list. Criminal backgrounds are reviewed at the time of eligibility interviews. Depending on criminal history, one may be denied at that time for the Housing Choice Voucher program.

All applicants are put in order on the waiting list via random selection lottery and HACP local preference. Applicants will then be invited to attend an eligibility briefing, at which time HACP will determine eligibility to receive a voucher. Because HACP places all successfully submitted applications on the waiting list, depending on the number of applications submitted, applicants sometimes have to wait 2 or more years to be contacted. [1],[2]

Mission Statement

To facilitate the transition into affordable housing for low-income residents.

Mission Statement Explanation

To facilitate the transition into affordable housing for low-income residents.

Facilitate: to make easier; we want to reduce the current barriers to entry for these kinds of programs

Transition: moving from unaffordable to affordable housing is a process that takes time; we want to ease the process while still emphasizing that this isn't something that can happen overnight

Purpose

With this project, our team wanted to gain an understanding for the different situations that many applicants face when trying to find affordable housing in order to improve the experience. To that end, we conducted domain research and interviews, distributed surveys, and created models and diagrams to represent our findings. We hope that our research will inform future policy change and positively impact individuals in need of a home.

The Process

For the work produced in this project, our team emphasized collaboration and iteration. We met multiple times a week to discuss initial ideas and then split to ideate before meeting again to integrate our ideas into a cohesive whole. By delegating certain tasks to specific team members, we were able to produce a large body of work in the time given, while also making sure that we maintained a central voice throughout all of the project's parts. We strived to gather expansive, thorough data through our research in order to best inform our models, affinity diagrams, and eventually our possible solutions. In doing so, we hope to add to the ongoing discussion around affordable housing in a productive and informative manner.



image: post-gazette.com

The Process



Affinity diagram



Our first group meeting

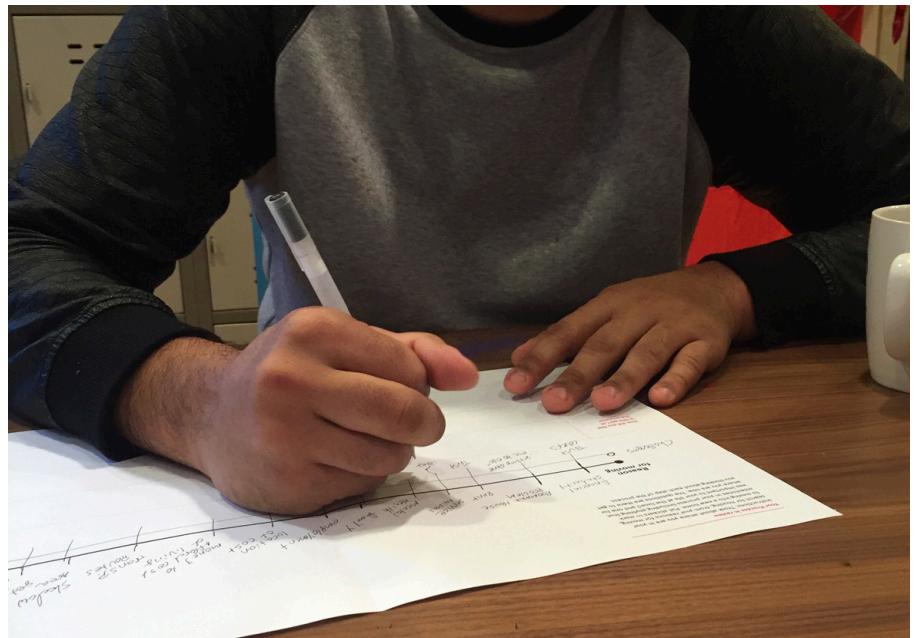


Another meeting

Our Interviews

We conducted 3 expert interviews and 4 contextual inquiries. We defined the “expert” of expert interview as a person who had not personally experienced or gone through the Section 8 application process but was familiar with some or all parts of it from an outsider’s point of view. So our expert interviews were interviews with people who had higher level knowledge about the process. On the other hand, contextual inquiries meant for us that we were attempting to gain more of an insider’s view of our problem space. The individuals who made up our contextual inquiries were people who had gone through or attempted to go through the Section 8 application process. These were people who the program was supposed to help; they were direct stakeholders.

For our expert interviews, we spoke to the manager of the Section 8 Program office, the Project Manager of Housing Connector at Action Housing, and a landlord who participates in the Section 8 Program. We sought out these people because we wanted more administrative views of the whole system. For our contextual inquiries, we talked to people who were at SILK, a safe space for black LGBT youth. We spoke to these people out of convenience, but they informed our models of the many failings of the Section 8 process and the system’s breakdowns.



A participant from SILK filling out our activity



The HACP office

Research: Literature Review

Our domain research was done in the form of a literature review, where we looked at different studies and articles to better understand the housing situation in Pittsburgh.

Navigating Pittsburgh's government's options for affordable housing is unnecessarily complicated.

First and foremost, the process to apply for and obtain affordable housing is extremely tricky, long-winded, and obscure. Not only does it involve multiple applications and uncertain outcomes, but residents are also often forced to visit government offices and find suitable residences that will accept housing vouchers on their own.

Furthermore, the City offers multiple kinds of vouchers and programs, about which information is difficult to discover. Combined with the stress of being evicted, financially insecure, or otherwise unable to remain in their homes, disadvantaged individuals face an unnecessary emotional and logistical burden just to find a place to stay. [3]

Landlords are one of the issues with housing supply.

Numerous families remain on the waitlist to receive vouchers for months on end. Yet, those who are given a voucher have only 120 days to activate it, after which it expires. Moreover, of those who are lucky enough to obtain a voucher, many would-be tenants are unable to find landlords willing to accept vouchers. Why landlords are against these vouchers will be an area of further research for our team. [4]

The process to apply for and obtain affordable housing is extremely tricky, long-winded, and obscure.

Oversaturated System with Underutilized Resources.

The overwhelming number of applicants for public housing in Pittsburgh result in long waiting lists and instability. Living in this state of limbo leads to additional social problems—domestic violence victims continue to stay with their abusers, people become homeless, and families constantly move from shelter to shelter as they strain the relationship between their friends and family. In 2013 there were 23,000 living in this situation, however, the Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh only utilized 71% of the allocated \$41.9 million for the voucher funding. [5]

Negative impacts of being on housing waiting lists.

In 2013, 23,000 people lived in limbo as they waited for public housing in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County. The shortage of low-income housing at the time was so bad that for the first time in 17 years Pittsburgh's city housing authority had to close the wait list for the majority of its properties. There is no centralized database to compare public housing shortages in other cities in Pennsylvania. About 11,600 people were in the queue for low-income housing through the Allegheny County Housing Authority and the Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh. For the voucher program, more than 11,300 people were on the city and county wait lists. Nearly 8,000 children were among those on wait lists for both programs. More than 80 percent of families on the lists fell under "extremely low incomes," defined as less than 30 percent of the area's median. Some consequences are: homelessness, domestic violence victims continue to stay with their abusers, fires in the winter from people heating homes with ovens, and instability as families move from shelter to shelter. [6]

One of the main underlying issues of the housing crisis in Pittsburgh is an inefficient distribution of resources.

Affordable housing is misunderstood.

To those unfamiliar with the ins and outs of public housing, a typical picture emerges: run-down buildings in impoverished areas serving people who would rather be anywhere else. This image reflects broader views about public housing. Some people believe subsidized housing or rent help is undeserved, or serves the wrong people. Some have warped perceptions about the quality of public housing developments, or the quality of life for those who inhabit them. Still others believe the program is the by-product of an inefficient and corrupt government agency. These beliefs show that public housing is often misunderstood, and that the general public still harbors negative biases towards the program and its members. [7]

"Don't judge a person if they have a Section 8 voucher. If there was enough affordable quality housing, reliable public transportation, they might not need that voucher... There needs to be enough low income housing for tenants so they will not be forced out of the city like I was." - Judy Gonzalez, Pittsburgh housing rally attendee. [10]

The same forces that seem to be revitalizing the city are forcing old residents out of their homes and workplaces.

Pittsburgh and its surrounding neighborhoods are poised to see significant growth and development over the next few decades after an era of decline. The Department of City Planning predicts a 7.5% increase in population, a 24.7% increase in the number of households, and the creation of over 50,000 jobs within the next 25 years. This is already evidenced by the increasing presence of local influences, such as UPMC, and the newer entrances of companies like Uber. [8]

Many people have biases that stem from limited understanding of public housing and the systems, programs, and institutions involved; this can be improved through education.

People seek housing because they are displaced.

East Liberty is an example of a changing neighborhood where many people are finding themselves without housing. In this case, developers have come into the historically black neighborhood, making it a mixed-income area.

Several HCV-eligible apartments have been demolished to accommodate new developments, and there are others scheduled. For example, the Penn Plaza apartments which are making way for a new Whole Foods, and East Liberty Gardens residents were relocated to a more high-poverty community.

This source argues for equitable development, in East Liberty, which is an effort to “revitalize historically disinvested communities in a way that closes racial disparities in ownership, opportunity, and housing security.” [6]

Affordable housing sometimes means poor living conditions.

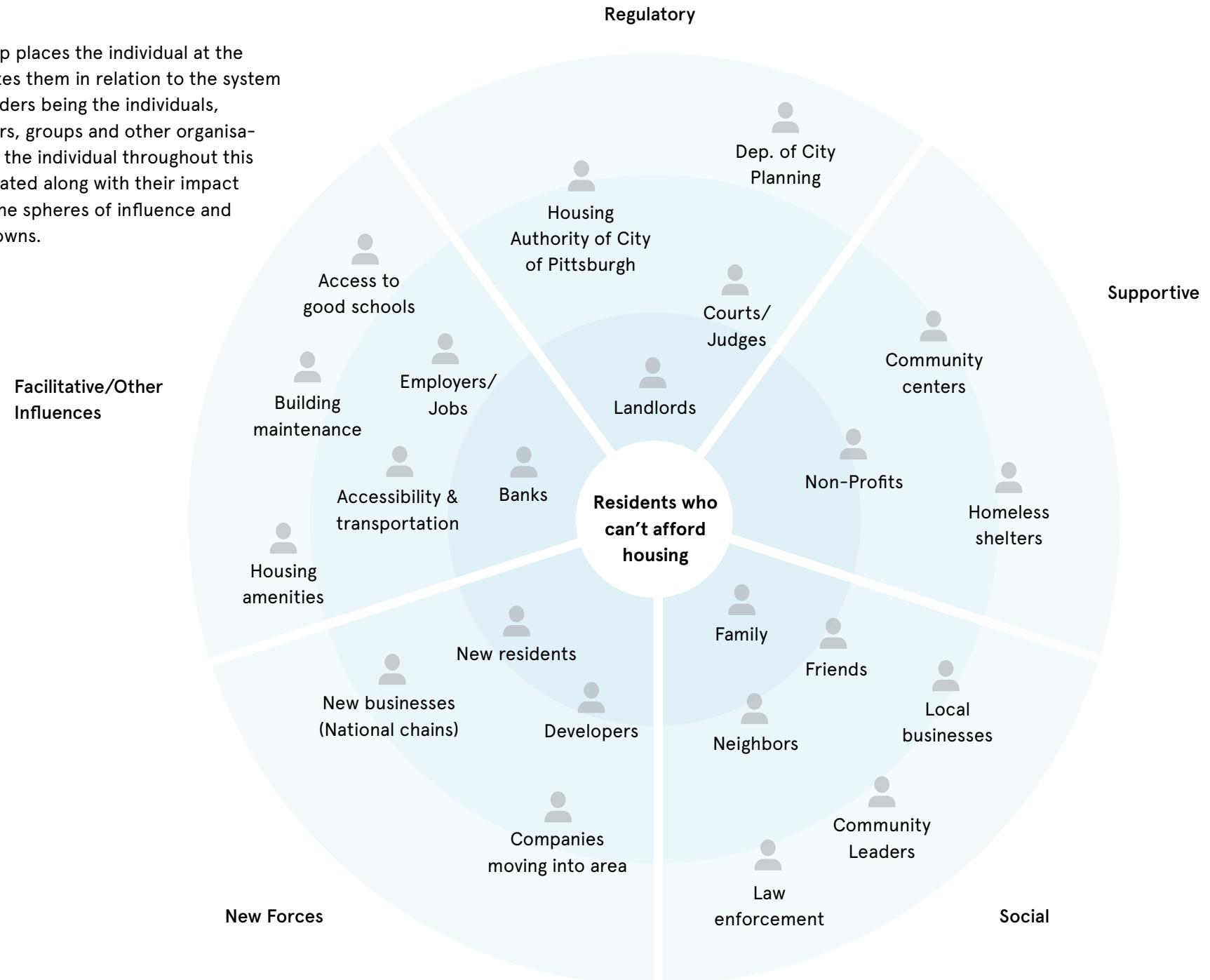
Recent protests in Pittsburgh have focused on a demand for better housing, and fear of being displaced. The asks to the city's Affordable Housing Taskforce include quality homes, inclusionary zoning, low-income home ownership subsidies and renter protections.

“I’m telling you, the conditions of our existing housing stock, are deplorable,” said Guy of the Northside Coalition for Fair Housing. “And people don’t have nowhere to go. They can’t even leave the falling ceiling or the mold in their bathroom because there’s nowhere else to go.” [9]

Affordable housing should be located in areas with good access to public transportation, jobs, and high-quality schools. Residents who want to move to high opportunity areas should be supported in that choice.

Stakeholder map

A stakeholder map places the individual at the center and analyzes them in relation to the system at hand. Stakeholders being the individuals, community leaders, groups and other organisations who impact the individual throughout this experience are stated along with their impact in order to examine spheres of influence and potential breakdowns.



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Key Finding 1

Individuals & agencies hold discordant views of the system and the process.

When applying for Section 8 housing, potential tenants have a drastically different view of its success and openness than do those working in government or nonprofit agencies. Many applicants end up on the waiting list for months or even years, if they are even approved at all.

Past criminal records, financial instability, or even minor life changes, such as a new phone number, can disqualify low income residents from receiving housing vouchers.

With many applicants coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, faith in government or systemic programs is already low and is decreased further when those in crisis do not receive the aid they need. On the other hand, non-profit and government workers seem to hold a much more positive view of the Section 8 process. They argue that it works well, given the resources they have, and that it serves the individuals most in need. However, in the context of the steadily rising

unemployment in the Pittsburgh region and the stigma surrounding subsidized housing, Section 8 does not seem to be a popular program among citizens. While they recognize its efforts and goals, many individuals have lost faith in finding a stable home using the government's help.

After applying, there are barriers to successfully getting on waitlist

After filling out an onerous application for Section 8 housing, many applicants are denied a position on the voucher waitlist, often due to poor accessibility of the program. Not only can a past criminal record delay one's application for long periods of time, but it can actually disqualify applicants from the process entirely. The last time a currently homeless man applied for Section 8 housing, he was told to apply again the following year due to his criminal past; that was in 2008 and he has lost faith in the process since. Many individuals have similar stories: with nowhere else to turn in order to find housing, they may end up back on the streets. Moreover, the process itself can be tedious and time-consuming, making it extremely difficult for those with mental or physical handicaps. Much of the information asked for in the long application can change between its filing and its completion, further delaying the process if the applicant does not proactively update their records. Finally, many individuals must go through the process alone or with little external aid, which can be a huge deterrent for those in crisis situations.

Stigma around Section 8 & Projects.

Regardless of their availability, many people are reluctant to live in government-subsidized housing due to the cultural stigma surrounding those who do choose to live there. As one landlord stated, "Section 8 has a negative connotation that folks [who receive affordable housing vouchers] will get in there and destroy your property, they're not as responsible." Moreover, buildings or areas associated with government housing are also perceived as being more violent and rougher

communities. Not only do these negative connotations often deter people from seeking government aid as they are reluctant to live in these places, but they also discourage landlords from accepting housing vouchers.

Section 8 isn't helping people be self-sufficient.

One of the goals of the Section 8 program is to provide subsidized housing to those in need by paying for all or part of their rent, which in turn can cripple people from being self-sufficient. Rather than really allowing individuals to become independent, in some ways, Section 8 encourages long-term use of its services, which can cause generational dependence on government support. Some tenants describe situations in which they would have to contribute a percentage of their income towards rent, so, instead of even looking for jobs, they choose to remain unemployed and on government-subsidized housing. Moreover, Section 8 does not come with training on how to live in shared spaces and tenants sometimes have problems with trash disposal and property maintenance, as described by one landlord. In order to mitigate these systemic issues, a director of the program has suggested shifting towards a work agency and limiting the amount of time any individual can use affordable housing benefits.

Ways in which agencies provide help.

Although the housing crisis in Pittsburgh is one of the city's lesser known problems, numerous agencies exist to help those in need of affordable

Ways in which agencies provide help.

housing, including Action Housing, Housing Connector, Allegheny Link, and Urban League. The services provided by these agencies can vary from help with filling out application forms to vouchers provided for payments. Some programs even provide counsellors who help individuals every step of the process, even visiting buildings on their behalf to help them locate housing. Non-profits also serve as a hub for information that can help potential tenants through the process of the application, which is often confusing and convoluted.

Many young, single applicants are unable to find housing through Section 8.

Most of our CI's were single individuals in their 20's with housing instability. The overall consensus between them is that it's almost impossible for people to get housing through Section 8. Most of them had been on the waitlist for years without any success, and their family and friends had been in the same situation. For the most part, there seems to be a lack of trust on the voucher program.

Those don't get through the Section 8 process look in other channels at market price.

The CI's we conducted on people who weren't successful at obtaining a voucher through Section 8 resorted to looking for housing that is unaffordable to them. Scott, for example, after being evicted from his property and being unable to obtain any further financial support, looked for a place to live in the newspaper, Zillow, Rent.com, and Craigslists. These postings often don't offer places within their budget, leading to instability and homelessness.

"[Section 8] not worth it, it's always 'there's no funding', or 'we ran out of money', or 'you don't meet the criteria.'"
– Scott"

Key Finding 2

The channels through which information flows are unreliable.

Throughout the lengthy application and housing search process, individuals require lots of information. This information can come from governmental agencies, non-profits, landlords, internet databases, or the applicants themselves, and can take the form of paperwork, available unit options, deadlines, appointment schedule, and more. Because there are multiple entities involved in the process of applying for, getting, and using a voucher, timely and efficient communication between the numerous players is key. But our contextual inquiries and research revealed systematic breakdowns in communication between the entities involved in this process.

First, information that individuals need to begin filling out an application is hard to find; the ways in which governmental offices such as HACP get information to potential applicants is flawed. Second, non-profits working with individuals throughout this process often have little to no contact with offices like the HACP. Third, landlord-tenant communications are often separate

from tenant-HACP communications, which can lead to misunderstandings in responsibilities expected of the tenant. In summary, an individual in this long and difficult process should receive helpful and easy-to-access information from all parties involved; this is not the case.

The landlord/tenant relationship is separate from Section 8 application process.

Often applicants don't understand that there is a process separate from the section 8 housing process in order to find a suitable unit that's eligible; prospective tenants only have 120 days to find housing after receiving the voucher, but negotiating with landlords can be a long process as well; one that people may not be fully prepared or understanding of. Ron, a landlord, has his own application that prospective tenants must fill out even after they receive a Section 8 voucher. As part of this process, he does a background and credit check, and sometimes visits their current housing to make sure they know how to maintain the unit well. He also decides whether to renew the lease every year, in addition to the section 8 housing deciding to renew the voucher.

Poor communication to update applicants about the process.

People seem to be at a high risk of missing out on communications if they fail to inform the office of changes in status. Raymond told us that he was not accepted on the wait list because he missed their phone call. Since the office requires clients to call and inform them if they have changed their address or phone number, Channing says that this "might cause people to miss out on opportunities if they're up on the wait list." Thomas explained that whenever he called the office, there was a queue of people waiting and sometimes he would have to wait for quite a long time before anyone answered.

Landlord frustration with tenants as well as HACP.

Often, tenants don't understand what their responsibilities as a tenant are or the urgency of the process, so may hinder the completion of the process. Ron explained that often, tenants don't hand in forms in time and that is a great cause of applications not being finished. He's also frustrated that tenants often don't understand how to take care of a house, and leave it in poor condition and wishes that HACP would teach them more about maintenance before they move in. He also experiences frustration with the housing office; the first time we met him, he had to go to the office to inquire about a lease that had never been drawn up (HACP's responsibility) even though the tenant had already been living there for months.

"I wasn't able to get a voucher just because I changed my phone number. That's crazy."
– Raymond

Individual financial issues or problems.

Imagine your landlord knocking on your door tomorrow to tell you that your rent has increased by 200% and that you have an ultimatum: pay up or move out. While this can be troubling for people across all socioeconomic classes, it is especially hard on those who lack stable jobs and live in gentrification centers, where eviction can mean moving out of that town permanently. Gaining Section 8 housing vouchers and finding leases that will accept them is already difficult; personal financial issues can be an even greater hindrance and often force people onto the streets. A Pittsburgh landlord reports that "most tenants are single women with children," who often face difficulties even paying the security deposit. People with no or limited constant sources of income are often forced out of their homes due to financial constraints or made to choose non-ideal accommodations. Moreover, those who lack money management skills may face painful situations when it comes time to pay rent.

Trouble keeping steady jobs.

Within the last year, Allegheny County's unemployment rate rose to 4.7%, while the national average declined to 4.5%, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. As unemployment increases, more and more people turn to low-paying jobs that allow for limited self-sufficiency. In turn, they become unable to afford housing in many areas. People who seek government-subsidized housing are often employed by fast food chains, security companies, or comparable organizations, working in the lowest rungs of society, if they are employed at all. Not only can it be extremely difficult to find a steady job, but maintaining one can be a struggle as well, especially for those

who suffer from mental or physical disabilities. One interviewee, who has not held a stable job for multiple years, claimed that he was fired from Jimmy John's, a popular fast food chain, for failing a training test. This widespread lack of consistent employment is definitely a huge factor in forcing people to turn to affordable housing programs for help in finding a place to live.

No centralized place to view all housing options.

A common complaint was that there's no centralized place to view all the places that people can find housing. For example, Ron, the Section 8 landlord, mentioned that there is a portal where he and other landlords can list their properties as they become available. However, often, prospective tenants are not aware that there are multiple wait lists (besides section 8) that they can be placed on. Both Channing and Raymond expressed a desire for a central place to get information about both the housing process as well as possible housing options.

Little communication between government and non-profits.

Even if they are both helping with rent, or the non-profit is helping a tenant with a security deposit, there is little communication between the two at the expense of the person being served. One example is Scott, who had his rent paid by Urban League while also on Section 8. When Urban League ran out of money, Scott had to come up with the rent himself on very short notice. Marie says that HACP "works with several social workers and other agencies to maintain communication regarding applicants," but wishes that they had more contact with these agencies.

Key Finding 3

The supply of housing, information, and resources often does not meet the existing demand in Pittsburgh.

Even when these resources are available, they are either unevenly distributed or underused. This is made evident at every level of the application process and it affects government agencies, nonprofits, and applicants alike—creating a number of barriers which undermine the success of the program.

The most significant scarcity in Section 8 is the actual supply of housing when compared to the number of applicants. In 2013, 23,000 people lived in limbo as they waited for public housing in Allegheny County. The shortage of low-income housing at the time was so bad that for the first time in 17 years Pittsburgh's city housing authority had to close the wait list for the majority of its properties. While issues of limited funding are widespread throughout the country, there's other issues with the Pittsburgh housing supply that demonstrate that the existing resources are underutilized or unevenly distributed. In general, housing for single individuals (as opposed to families) and housing for people with disabilities seemed to be most difficult to obtain using the voucher program.

While there are several organizations in the city with the mission of helping individuals throughout the process, these too often encounter problems when facing the overwhelming demand. For example, non-profits that aim to provide financial support to low-income individuals looking for housing will sometimes run out of money, leaving residents without aid and forcing them to relocate once their homes are rendered unaffordable. Furthermore, people who work in these non-profit organizations often have overwhelming caseloads, leading to them being unable to fully follow each case and allowing for more errors in the process.

Many non-profits aid in the housing process, but they often run out of resources.

Our contextual inquiries showed individuals that were receiving outside support from non-profit organizations, but found themselves without a home once these ran out of money. Such is the case with Scott, who was receiving help from Mercy Behavior in order to pay for his rent. However, once funding stopped, his landlord had to seize the property he was inhabiting, leaving him in the search for housing once again.

Agencies (non profit and government)often have more clients than they can handle.

Several housing programs in Pittsburgh are experiencing a demand that exceeds their existing monetary and human resources. In the case of the voucher program for the HACP (Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh), each staff member has about a 430 tenant case load out of the 5600 total monthly vouchers they have available. These staff members must be in constant contact with their tenants in order to maintain an updated record of their cases and to make sure they're not abusing the system. In addition, the 5600 monthly voucher cap leaves thousands of individuals that qualify for aid without any sort of help due to the demand exceeding the supply.

Housing for individuals (as opposed to larger families) is in low supply.

Each of our four CIs was a single individual searching for housing for themselves or to share with one or two other individuals. This stands in contrast to what we heard from a landlord who participates in the program, who usually sees single mothers with children entering his units. Marie Payden, the Manager of Section 8 at HACP, also told us that mothers with children are the most common participants in the program. Because of this demographic, many participants

are in search of 1 or 2 bedroom apartments, which Ms. Payden told us are very hard to come by. In short, "demand doesn't meet supply" (as told to us by Channing Porter, Project Manager for Housing Connector). This problem is exacerbated by the fact that landlords often only decide to list a few units at a time on the HACP website.

Personal living preferences and housemate coordination are barriers to finding housing.

Many of the individuals with whom we spoke listed roommate concerns as challenges to finding appropriate housing. Some of them cited past problems with roommates, while others cited personal habits or cleanliness issues; all of them expressed desires to live alone or with a few select individuals. For example, Scott at SILK said he does not like sharing toilets or kitchens, and has lived with others in the past but is now looking for a place where he can live alone. As we learned from our expert interviews, this kind of low-occupancy (1 to 2 bedroom) housing is in very high demand. As a result, many of the individuals we talked to have resorted to couch surfing because the housing they want is not available to them.

Numerous, often overwhelming steps to get affordable housing in Pittsburgh.

Logistics relating to the affordable housing process in Pittsburgh are perceived by applicants, landlords, and government workers as confusing and disorganized. Several of our CI's walked us through the extensive list of steps they needed to take in order to fulfill their role in the process, and overall, every person expressed some sort of exasperation on the subject. Marie Payden, the manager for Section 8 at HACP, compared the Housing Authority in Pittsburgh to the one in Cleveland where she used to work. She mentioned how the "Pittsburgh office management style allows for autonomy, leading to a dynamic that is confusing and non-unified".

Accessibility issues hinder the process.

Many people involved in the housing application process have physical or intellectual disabilities that mean they may need additional accommodations beyond basic housing. Channing Porter told us that people in this situation can apply for what is called "reasonable accommodation." This is a form that must be completed within 15 days and requires the sign-off of a doctor or social worker to indicate that a given individual is actually "impaired" and in need of additional resources in their housing option of choice. After completing this, individuals must wait 30 days to hear if they have been approved. Then, they must wait for housing with their requested amenities (such as lower countertops, grab bars in bathrooms, wheelchair accessible entrances, etc.) to become available; often, people who don't need these extra features have nevertheless been moved into such places. The time and effort involved in requested and receiving additional accommodations is a major roadblock in the process.

Accessibility of future resources is a concern during a move.

Because units often become available throughout the city, applications who have been approved for vouchers have a choice of where to move. Many individuals with whom we spoke had strong preferences for where they want to end up. Some, like Scott, want to live close to the city in neighborhoods like the Northside. Others, like Jeremy, have to consider the fact that they will need transportation to and from their future neighborhoods; this is difficult if individuals don't own cars. As people move into new areas, they have to find new doctors, grocery stores, schools, and other resources. These kinds of changes are a major concern, especially for mothers with children who are already enrolled in schools, that often affect the likelihood that someone will successfully find a new home.

Beginning the application process is difficult.

Of all the problems we were able to identify by talking to experts and participants of the system, issues with the actual application were the most prevalent. Channing Porter wishes they could "cut down on the number of steps," and notes that "it would be nice if it was just one process or application." Instead, even getting on the waitlist involves a lengthy application process, over 3 hours long, and many individual, varied, follow-up pieces. Individuals have to either complete these on paper and mail them in, or have access to a computer with which to access the online application. Neither of these assumptions, access to postal service or internet/computer, hold for every potential applicant. Many people find the physical application itself "daunting," according to Ms. Porter. Furthermore, many individuals that we talked to say they simply do not have the

Supporting summaries

patience for services like Allegheny Link, which are intended to help people start the process of applying for a voucher. The application process is flawed in many ways, but the biggest problems are its length and complexity.

Problems continue even after voucher approval.

After an individual completes the application process, they are either approved or denied a housing choice voucher. If denied, they have 30 days to appeal the decision, attend an informal hearing, and hopefully get the decision overturned (as told to us by Marie Payden). But this is not widely known information; many people get denied for a voucher for reasons such as a past criminal record (as was the case with Scott), but do not know that they can appeal the decision.

On the other hand, if someone is approved for a voucher, they are not technically in the program until they "find a unit, sign a lease, and sign an HAP (housing assistance payment) contract" (according to Marie Payden). Successful applicants have 120 days to find an appropriate unit, with the option of a 30 day extension. Ms. Payden told us that while this seems like a long time, many people actually fail to find a suitable unit in that time. So, even if someone is approved for a voucher, issues still exist: many people don't end up being able to utilize that support because they can't find a home.

"The biggest barrier in Allegheny County is that the demand doesn't meet the supply." -Channing

Personas

To explore the possibilities of who would be using our end product, we created personas. By creating these imaginary applicants, we were able to design with a focus: any design choices we made were evaluated against what our personas (Teddy and Erica) would benefit from using.



"Finding housing is hard."

Teddy

23, Male, Gay, Single

Currently "couch surfing" with friends & family

Short term goals

Find independent housing (i.e. not with family)
Keep current job

Personality

Impulsive



Voices Needs



Pessimistic



Goal-Oriented



Long term goals

Financial stability
Lack of long term goals/plans

Frustrations

No stable source of income
Apathetic towards system
Roommate search is difficult

Motivations/Needs

Want to be independent/self sufficient
Wants to live alone
Wants a specific neighborhood
Wants stable income

Barriers

Lack of supportive community
Transportation
Needs mental health/behavioral support system
Economic & financial issues



"It's rewarding to help people. You don't get into this line of work for the pay."

Erica

29, engaged

Case worker at HACP

Bachelors Degree in Urban Studies

Short term goals

- Help clients meet deadlines
- Help new applicants understand housing process
- Help clients fill out paperwork

Personality

Introverted



Hard Working



Empathetic



Organized



Long term goals

- Work/life balance
- Help clients achieve long-term stability
- Get promoted

Frustrations

- Hard to communicate with some clients
- Not always on the same page as clients

Motivations/Needs

- Wants to make an impact in community
- Wants to help individuals
- Wants to be financially stable (for her own family)

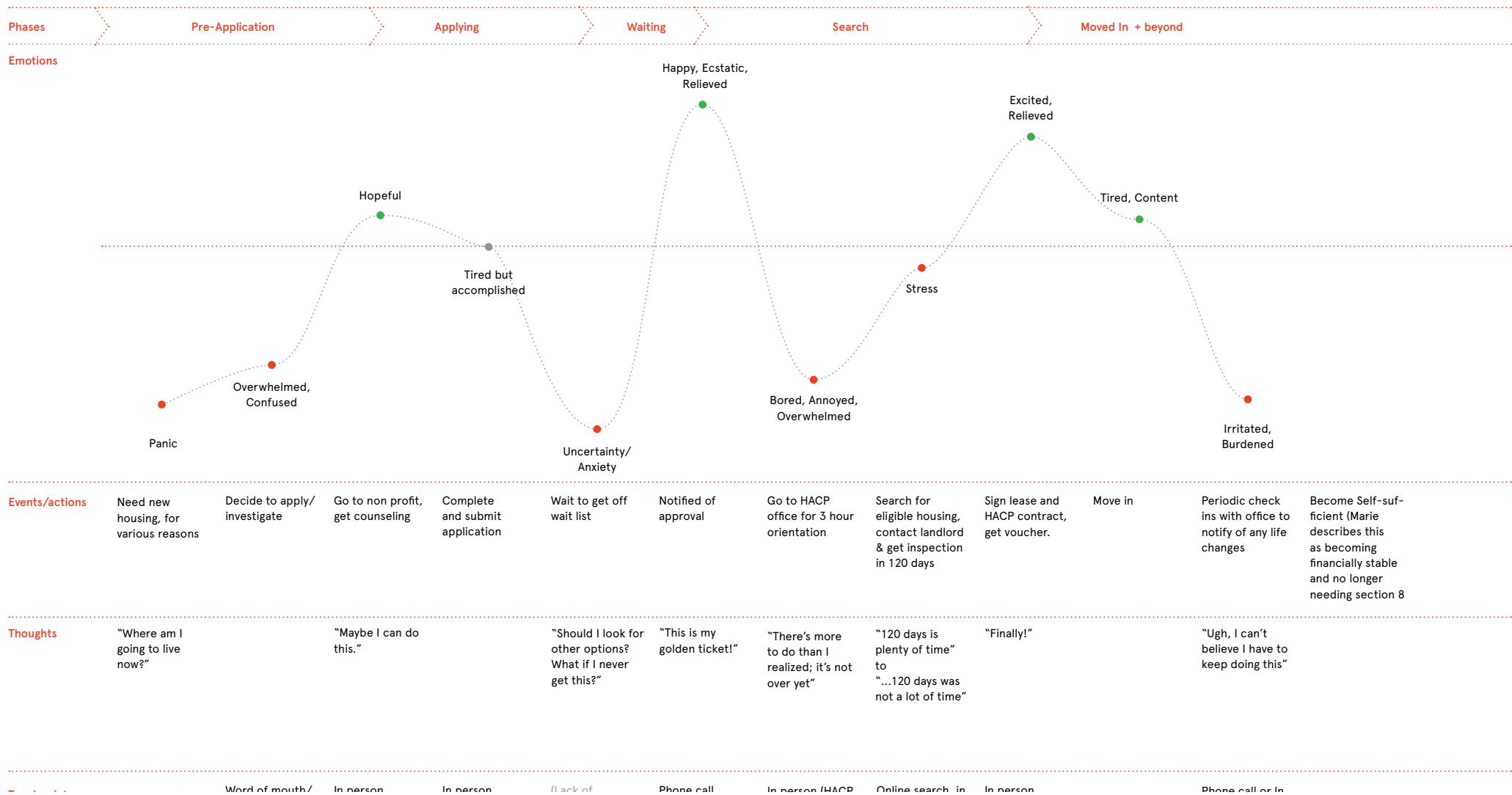
Barriers

- Heavy caseload
- Limited income
- Office management issues
- Not enough resources to help everyone

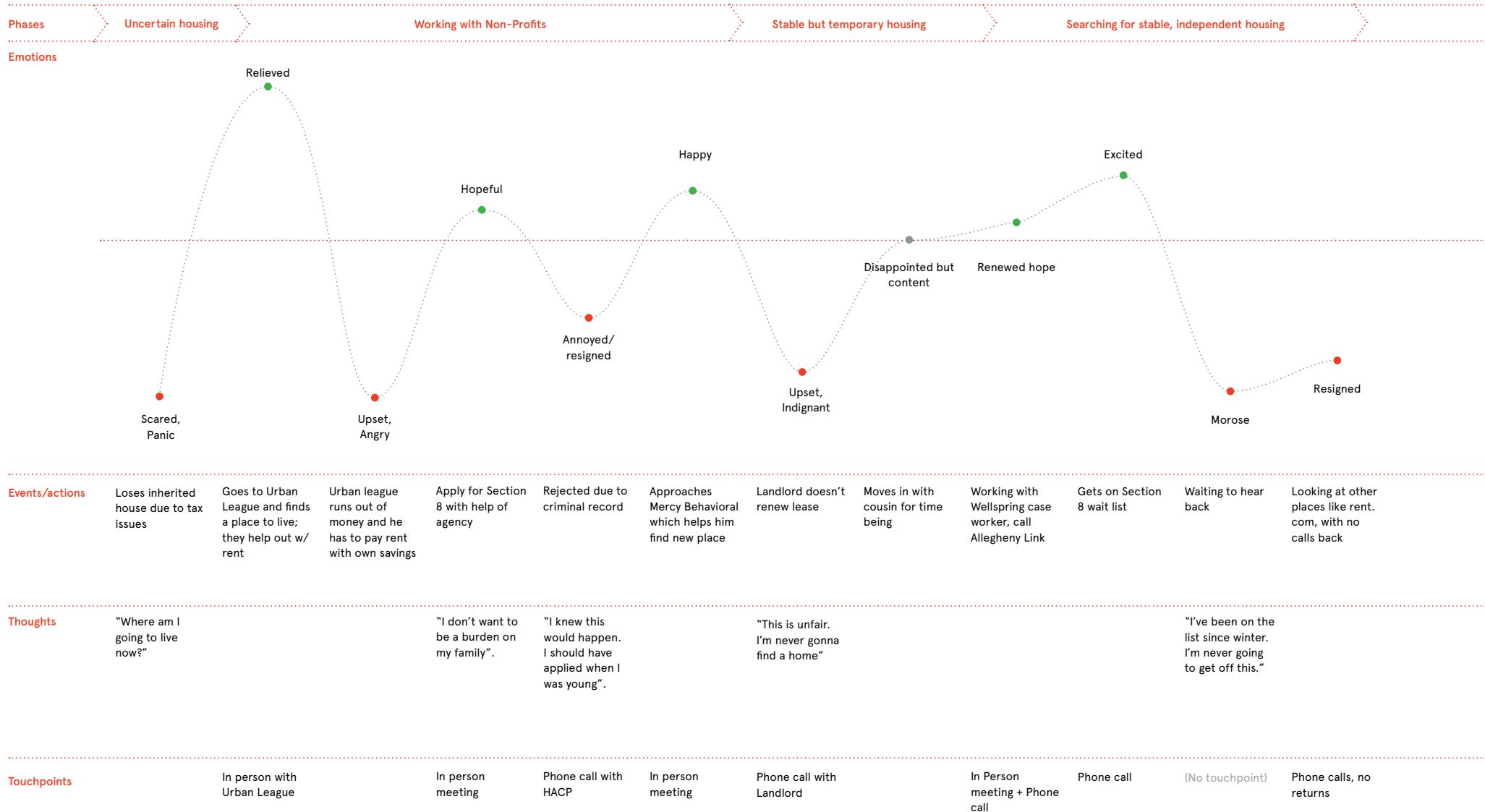
Journey Maps

A journey map details a user's experience of a process including the actions they took, the phases involved, and the thoughts they experienced. It also includes the points at which they made contact with the related entity and a graph of the emotions they experienced. Considering the individual's perspective from journey maps help identify breakdowns and target areas for improvement within an interaction.

User Journey: Section 8 housing applicant,
according to our expert interviews



User Journey: Scott



Problem Area 1

People lack information during the “waiting” phase.

As we identified in our journey maps, individuals have to go through many steps in the application process. However, at the center of this is an extended period of waiting to find out if they've been approved for a voucher. This period can be as long as months or years, and is often a time of uncertainty and anxiety.

One of the main problems that we discovered with this phase is its lack of touch-points. At most other points in the process, individuals are in contact with non-profits or government agencies or even landlords, but during the waiting period, individuals are left on their own. This lack of communication is what leads to the uncertainty that many people experience and is also responsible for the lack of faith that individuals have in the system. Improving the waiting experience for applicants could be achieved by something as simple as periodic updates about the status of an application from the Section 8 office. However, we also want to explore other options that might integrate non-profits as well.

Problem Area 2

There is no centralized list of all affordable housing resources.

Individuals in crisis situations often lack the time, resources, and motivation to conduct a wide range of research and explore all available options. We heard from many of the people we interviewed that they struggled to find information about available housing units. Many of them wished there was one location, a website perhaps, where they could go to browse available units. This need speaks to other breakdowns that we identified in our research: namely, poor communication between organizations and individuals. Individuals search for units, but organizations such as the HACP do not communicate adequately to help in this process or to provide resources. Many applicants are unaware that the HACP even has a website with unit listings. Furthermore, landlords often do not list all of their units on the current HACP website, but do not have a way of efficiently letting applicants know about these other units. As a result, people turn to Craigslist, social media, or the city paper to find housing—methods that have low success rates.

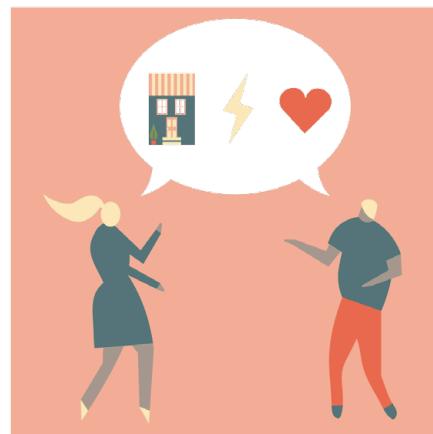
Storyboards of solutions

With our key findings in mind, we identified two main problem areas. We then brainstormed different “How might we...” questions that we might try to address the issues around housing that we found in our research.

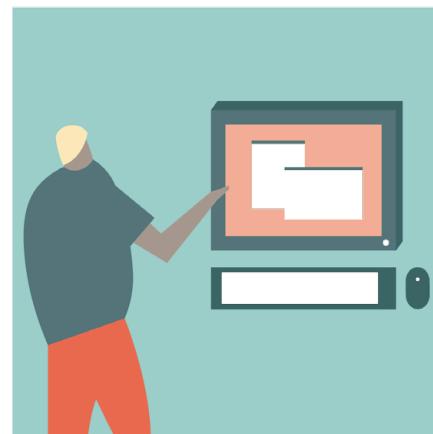
How might the HACP make time spent on the waitlist more purposeful and less aimless for younger applicants?



Sean has applied for the Section 8 Voucher Program and is now on the waitlist. He's looking to move out of his cousin's apartment.



Sean talks with his caseworker to formulate long-term goals.



His caseworker gives him updates about his housing application as well as resources to realize his goals.



A year later, Sean is still on the waitlist, but is now saving up money to go to trade school and become an electrician.

How might we modify the Section 8 process to promote or encourage a higher level of self-sufficiency?



Teddy has aged out of the foster system. He needs to find a home and doesn't want to rely exclusively on the government.



He applies for the self-sufficiency program, and his case worker connects him to various resources.



Six months later, Teddy has a stable job and is able to pay 50% of the rent in his new apartment.



Teddy graduates from the program with help of his case worker.

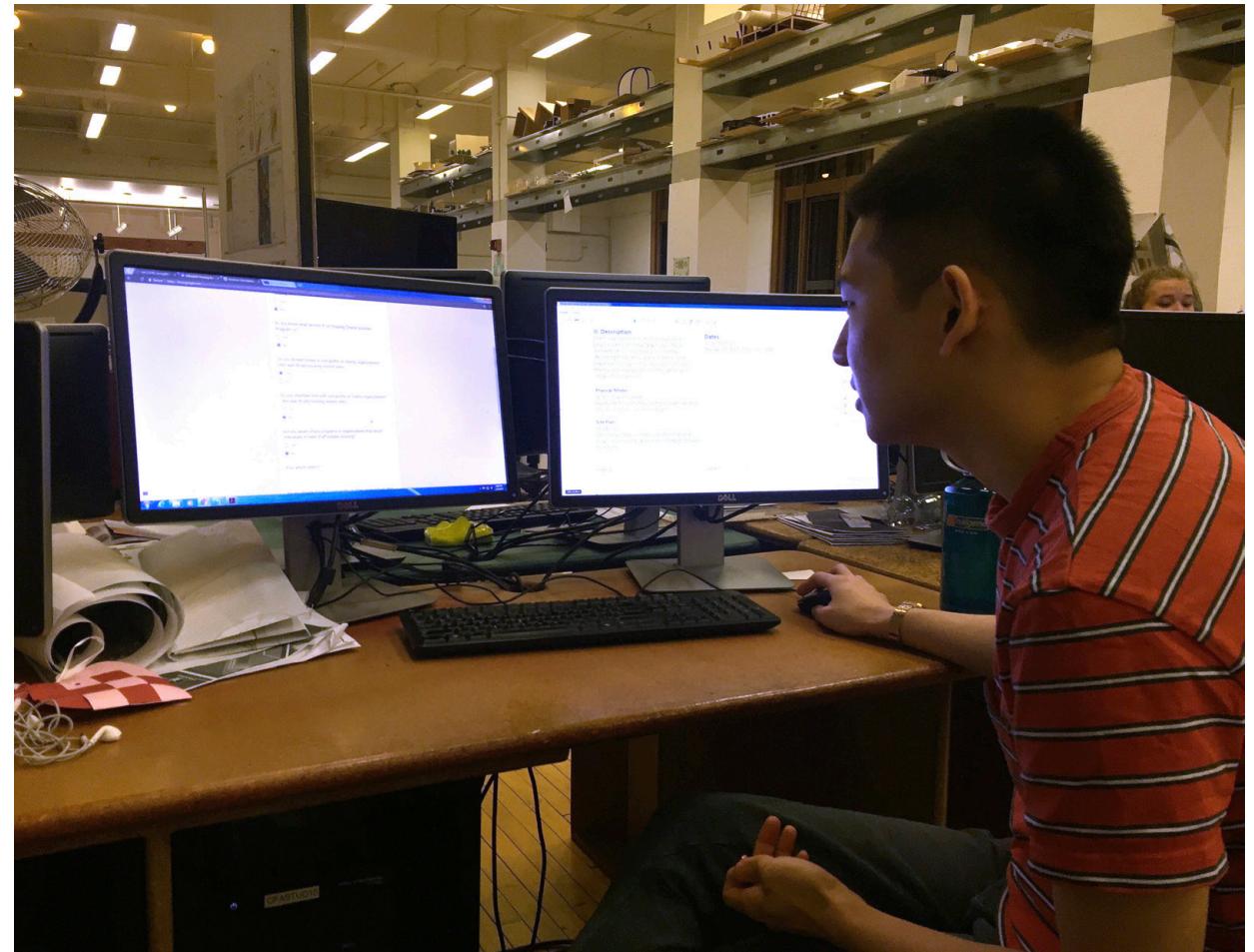
Next Steps

If we were to continue this project, we would start by interviewing a more diverse set of individuals in need of housing and organizations involved in the Section 8 process to more specifically find breakdowns within the system. Furthermore, we would look at other cities to understand how they have handled housing shortages and perhaps use their policies to inform our solutions. Researching other contemporary programs that have been more successful in finding housing for residents in crisis would help guide our ideas on how Section 8 could be improved. As our research currently stands, the greatest priority for the city seems to be the lack of housing and employment options for low-income residents. Working to ameliorate both of these would help Pittsburgh ensure that its residents are not forced onto the streets.

Survey Methods

Our survey was distributed to individuals in our community to understand their perception of the affordable housing crisis, as well as their involvement with other causes. To this end, we probed participants' knowledge about Section 8, some that asked about their volunteer and donation habits, and some that asked if they were specifically involved in housing-related volunteer opportunities. Since we had a hunch that housing is a largely unknown charity sector, we wanted to test this assumption and see with what other causes people are involved. Furthermore, we wanted to understand why people volunteer and donate money to help inform us of how these reasons can be transformed into support for affordable housing programs. Example questions included: Do you know what Section 8 (or Housing Choice Voucher Program) is?, Do you currently donate money to non-profits or other organizations?, and What things stop you from donating?.

We first tested our survey with a demographic of group members' friends and classmates, in order to ensure that our pre-test reflected the population who would end up taking the revised survey. We created our survey using Google Forms and distributed it via social networks and to the same demographic. We had twenty-one respondents on our thirteen question survey.



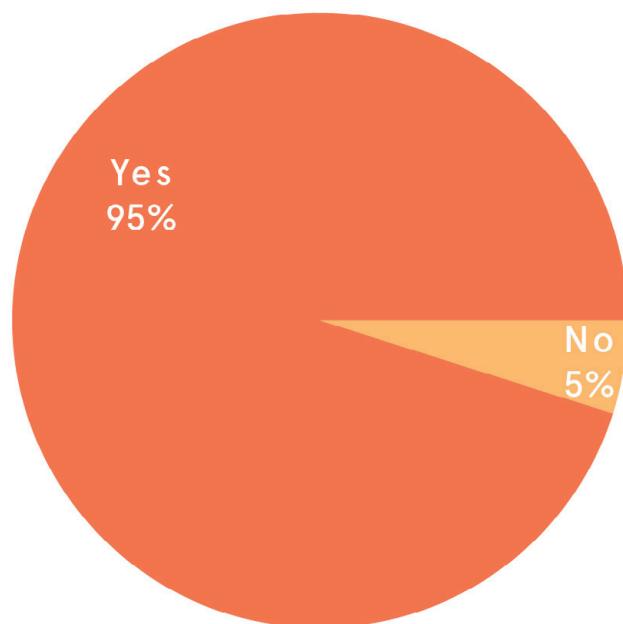
Testing our survey

Survey Results

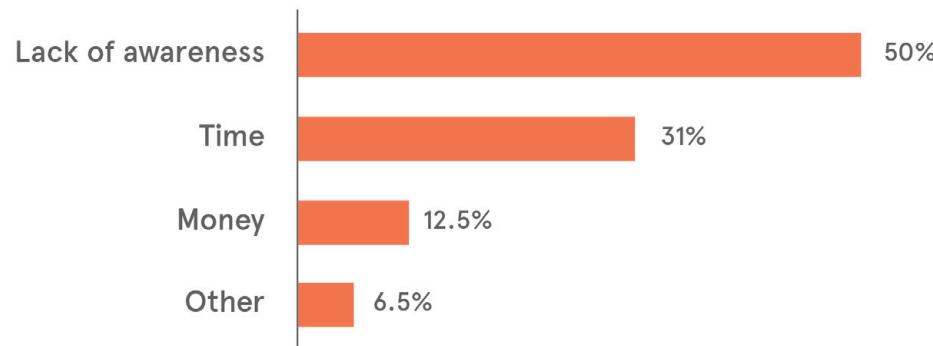
Our survey data confirmed what we had suspected: many people don't know about the affordable housing application process, and many do not volunteer with or donate to housing-related causes. Our survey respondents were all aged 18-24 and many cited financial or timing-related reasons for not donating or volunteering.

These results led us to conclude that maybe other forms of community involvement, such as encouraging individuals to attend public forums or call state representatives to push for policy changes, would be more beneficial to helping improve the affordable housing system.

Have you ever donated or volunteered to organizations that assist individuals in need of affordable housing?



What keeps you from donating or volunteering to these organizations?



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Appendix: Bibliography

All the sources we used in this process, mostly for our literature review.

Sources

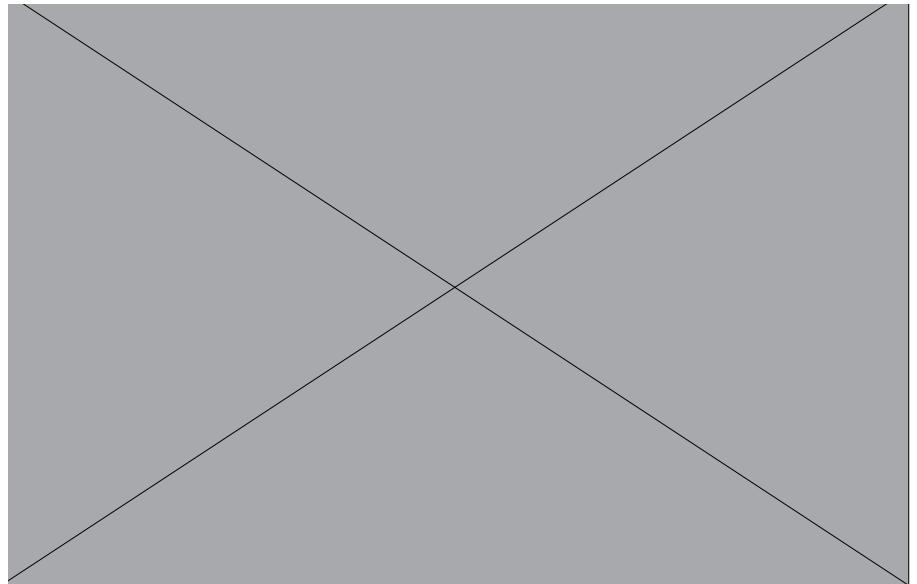
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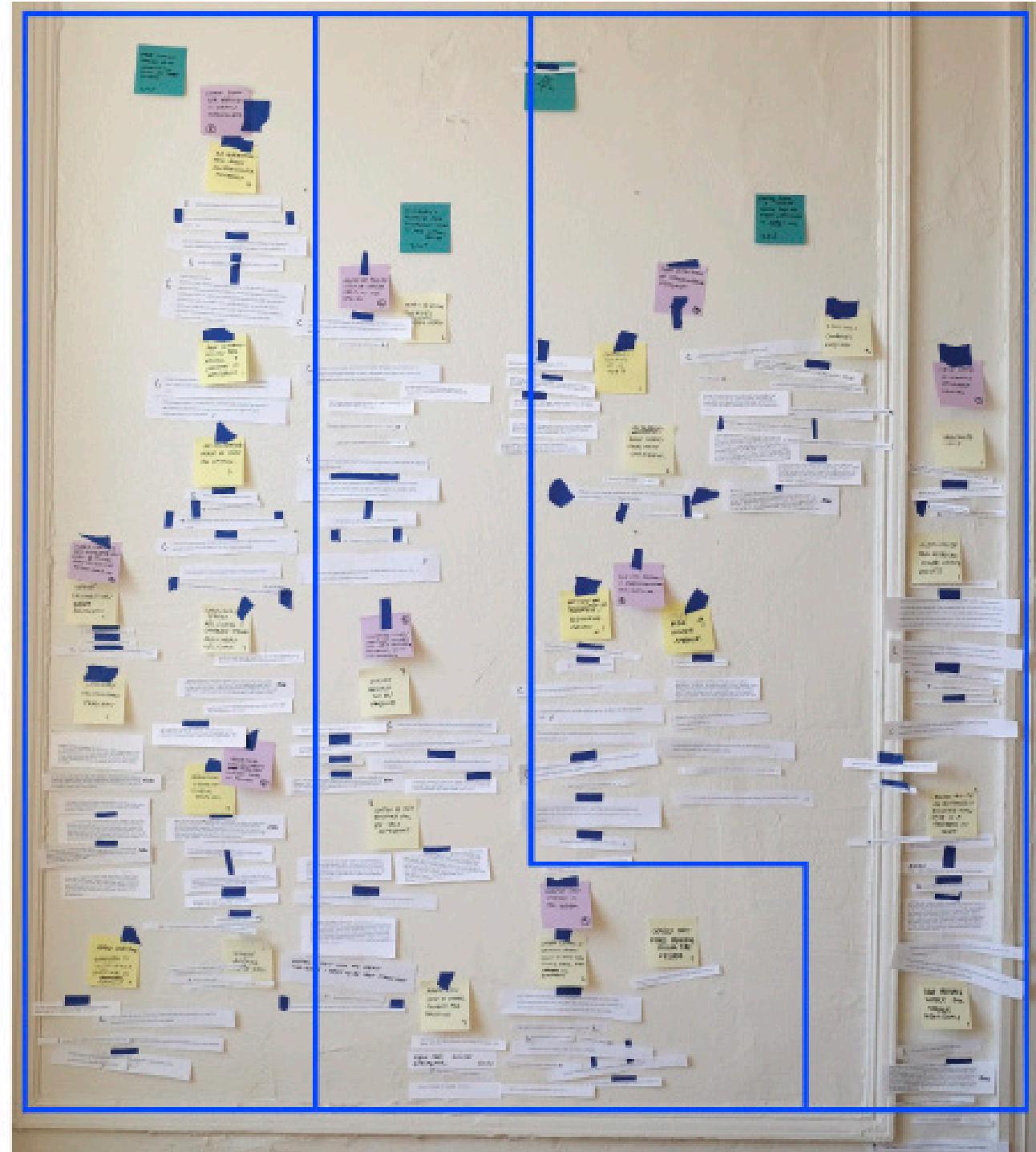
Data set

During our research, we came across a trove of residential and demographic data in the form of a PDF called “PGHSNAP.”



Affinity Diagram

After conducting all of our interviews and creating multiple models to represent the information we received, we consolidated every quote of interest into an affinity diagram. This diagram was an exercise in finding connections between our points of data. By highlighting the common links in the quotes from our interviews and sorting the quotes accordingly, we were able to identify key findings that emerged from our different categories.



First model of applicant process	Resident	Landlord/Renter	Housing Authority (PHA)	Housing & Urban Dev. (HUD)
Takeaways: information about this process is sparse and we found it difficult to understand. This helped us identify some important questions in the gaps. For example, what are residents doing while they are waiting for housing? The status can only be accessed online, so what about those with limited internet access/knowledge of technology? This information was pieced together from many sources, so do prospective applicants have access to a good understanding of the process?	Find PHA for city. Residents prioritized for housing by: 1) involuntarily moved, 2) are homeless 3) income in lower 50%	Landlord works with PHA to be HCV eligible property.	Different in each city: Housing Authority of City of Pittsburgh (HACP)	Funds PHAs at federal level: cover overhead costs and money for vouchers
	Pre-apply online to wait list for Project-based vouchers (apply to specific communities) OR, IF OPEN, apply to be on wait list for HCV (Section 8)		Checks backgrounds: criminal activity, credit, and references	
	HACP site: applicants can spend 2 or more years on wait list.		Opens HCV waiting list applications according to openings (currently will open in 12-18 mo)	With leftover money, the HUD offers money for additional vouchers to PHAs on competitive basis.
	If eligible, receive voucher with 90 days to find housing (if HCV), otherwise, assigned a unit (PCV)	Landlords do not have to accept voucher. If they do, landlord enters lease with tenant and agrees to comply with HCV program reqs.	Conducts inspections of properties to ensure good living conditions.	
	Tenant pays 30% of monthly adjusted gross income		PHA pays percentage of monthly rent to landlord.	

Appendix: Field Guide

Our field guide informed our practices while conducting interviews. It laid out the guidelines by which we operated while talking to people in the community and included the consent form we gave to interviewees as well as rules for how to conduct ourselves.

Target Demographics

We have two key demographics that we are trying to target. For our expert interviews, we want to talk to nonprofits or other agencies already working in the problem space we outlined in our domain research. Our hope is that these groups will be able to give us an overview of existing problems with the process of getting into affordable housing and will be able to connect us with families or individuals currently in the transition who would be willing to talk to us for our contextual inquiries.

For our contextual inquiries, we hope to target individuals or families who are currently in the process of applying or on the waitlist for public housing. Low-income residents are our primary target, but we are not limiting our scope to any age, race, gender, or employment. We think it would be beneficial to talk to people of many different backgrounds to assess the breakdowns in the system that affect the most people.

Contextual Inquiry: Goals + Supplies

Need: Video camera + tripod, retrospective activity papers, markers/sharpies, colored dot stickers

Goals: General background interview

Gain insight into the lives of people on the housing waitlist both before and after they applied
Find out about resources they've already utilized
What they like & dislike about the process

Retrospective activity

Get more concrete information about the process of applying for housing
Find out about problems in the housing application/transition process from a bottom-up, personal perspective

Expert Interview: Goals + Supplies

Need: Video camera, Notebook or other note-taking method

Goals:

Establish a point of contact within the community we're serving (people who have already worked with those we're trying to help). Find out about problems in the housing application/transition process from a top-down, administrative perspective.

**Timeline:
Expert Interview**

(Intro) Why we're here
(Intro) What we're going to do today
(Activity) Interview
(Conclusion) Thank yous, exit, next steps

**Timeline:
Contextual Inquiry**

(Intro) Why we're here
(Intro) What we're going to do today
(Activity) Background Interview
(Activity) Retrospective
(Conclusion) Thank yous, exit, next steps

Why we're here

Say this to each participant: We're a team of students at Carnegie Mellon University in a User Research class interested in learning about individuals and families who are transitioning into public housing. To do that, we're trying to reach out to people involved in all stages of the process, including the support systems built around the issue. We're especially interested in learning about what it's like to apply and wait for public housing or housing support. We'll use what we learn from you to propose ways to help make the process easier or more manageable. The end goal is to help people, so we're looking forward to hearing how you think we can best do that.

**What we'll be doing
today: Expert Interview**

Today, we want to gain a better understanding of the current situation that people face when they apply for and transition into affordable housing. To do that, we're going to ask you some questions about your organization and how your interact with individuals or even other organizations to help in this process. There are no wrong answers! We'd love to hear stories, anecdotes, anything you think might be useful to someone trying to understand this process.

**What we'll be doing
today: Contextual
Inquiry**

Today, we want to start with a basic background interview to learn a bit more about you. We're going to ask you some questions, but please remember that there are no wrong answers. We are not experts, and we want to learn from you, so please don't hesitate to bring something up even if you don't think it's important. After the interview, we're going to do an activity called a retrospective. This is to get you thinking about the process from start to finish (or where you are now) of applying for housing. We'll guide you through this, and again, there are no wrong answers!

Questions:
Expert Interview

Can you tell us a little bit more about who you are? Family, where you've lived, history, etc.

What and where was your last permanent place of residence?

Under what circumstances did you have to leave? How long ago was this?

Where are you staying right now? Is this temporary or permanent? Is this paid for through housing vouchers, your own money, loans, or another source of finances?

What steps did you take to find more affordable housing?

We understand that this is a difficult process. What have been some of your strengths/ motivating factors/sources of aid in this time?

What have been some of the hardest parts of this process?

What changes have you witnessed in your community (positive & negative) that relate to housing problems?

How did you feel while going through this process?

If you could help other people in your situation, what would you do?

Thank you + next steps:
Expert Interview

Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with us. We also want to know if there's any families or individuals you could connect us with (those who are currently in this process or have already completed the transition) who would be willing to talk to us?

Questions:
Contextual Inquiry

Can you tell us a little bit more about yourself and how you got involved in this kind of work? Why did you choose this line of work?

Where does your involvement start in the process? (Are you there to help people the instant they start their applications...?)

How do people who need help get in touch with you? Or do you reach out to them?

Do you work with other organizations or agencies or does your organization stand alone?

What resources do you provide to people seeking help?

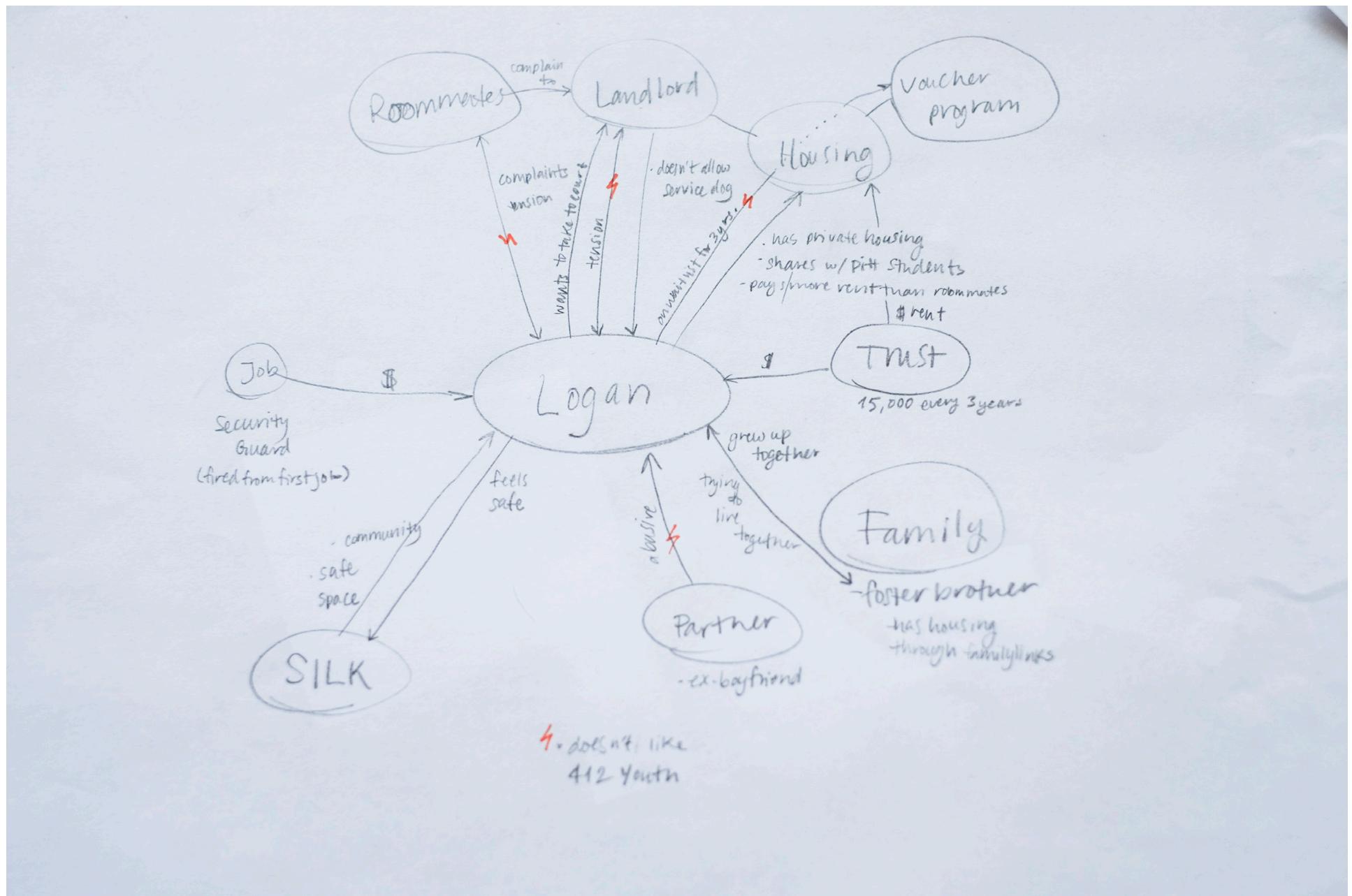
Can you briefly walk us through the typical steps of helping someone with their application process? Can you give us any examples or stories about particularly interesting cases?

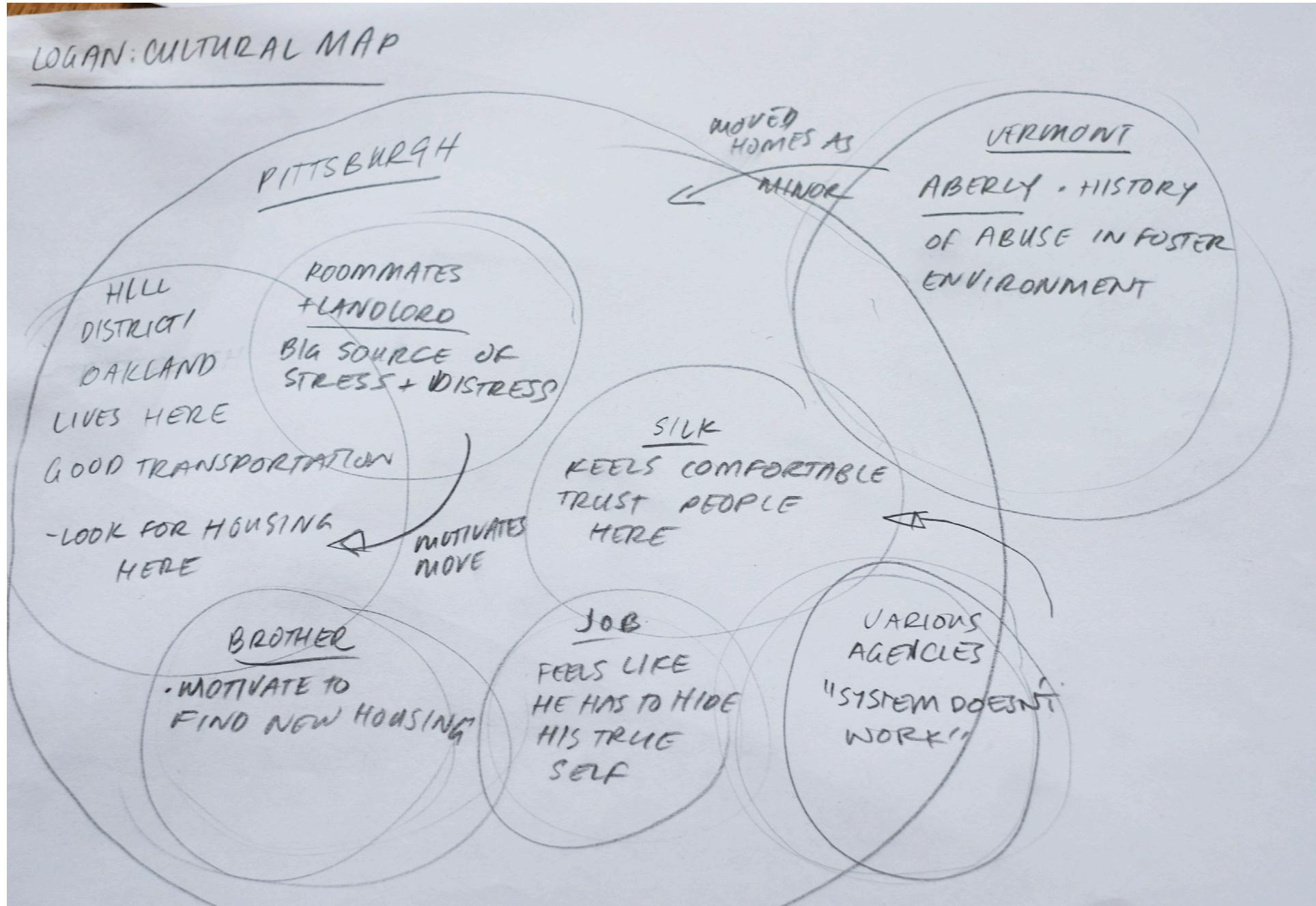
Thank you + next steps:
Contextual Inquiry

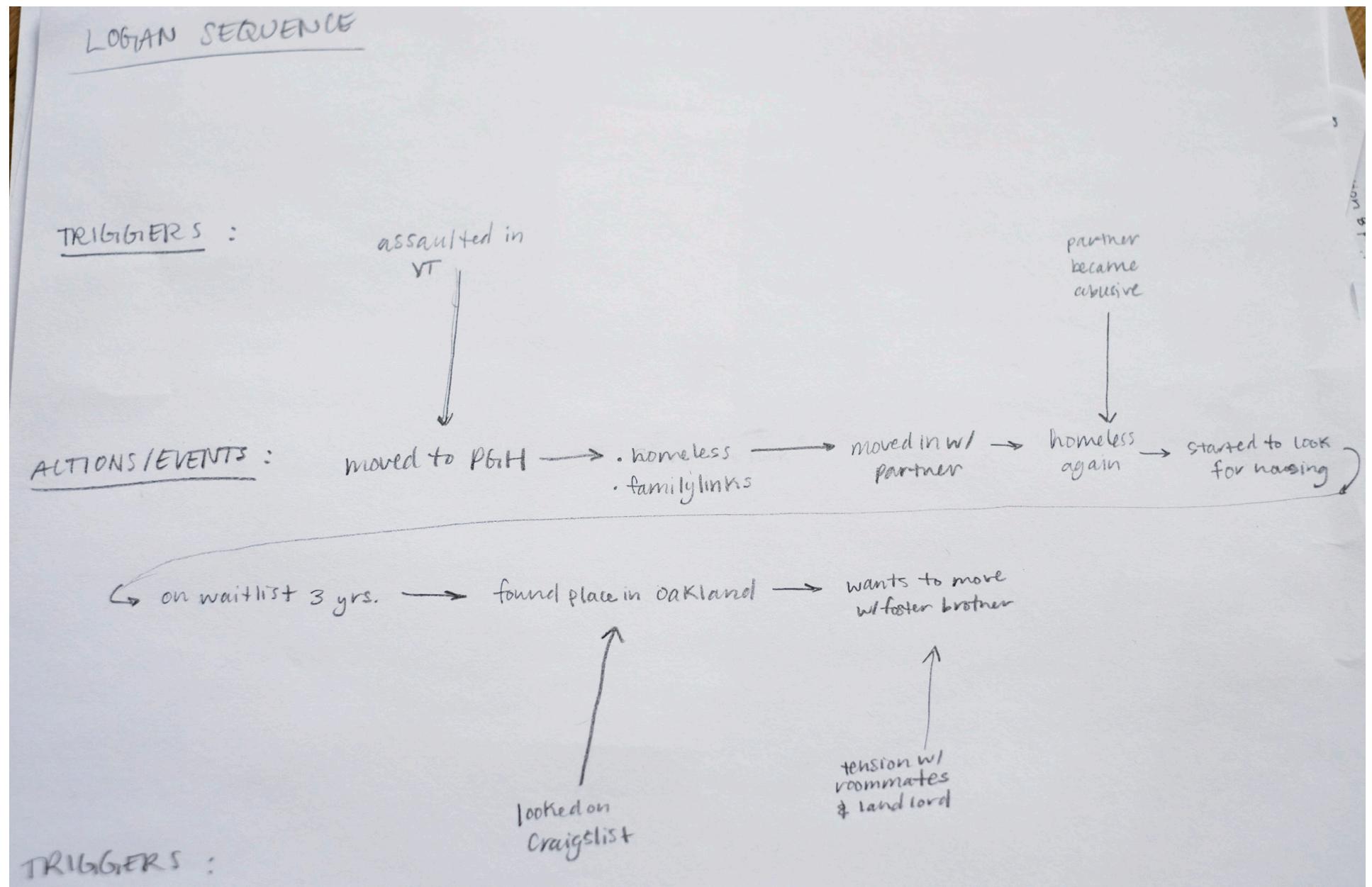
Thank you so much for taking the time to meet with us. Do you have any questions for us? Please don't hesitate to contact us if you think of any questions or concerns later on.

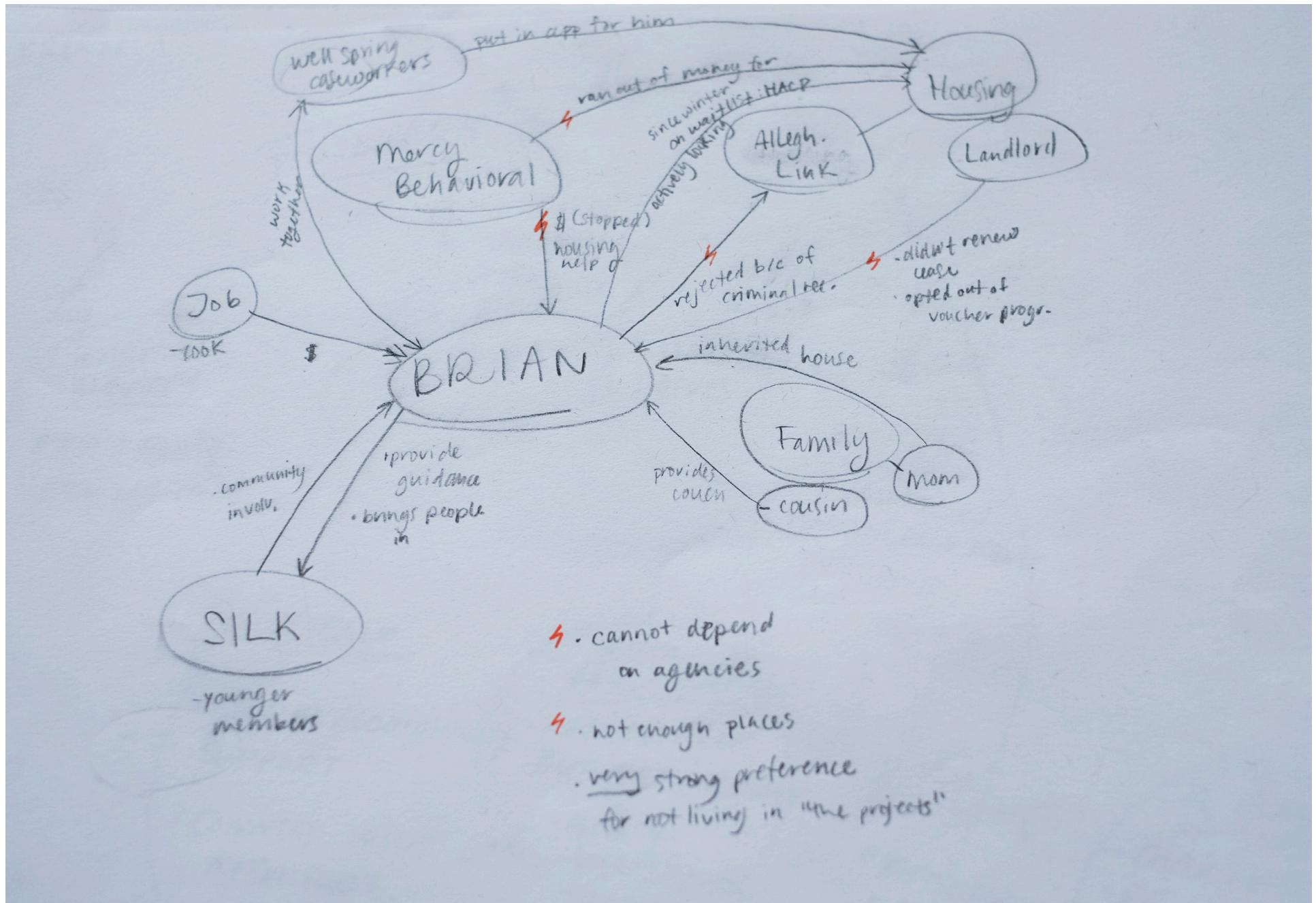
Appendix: CI Models

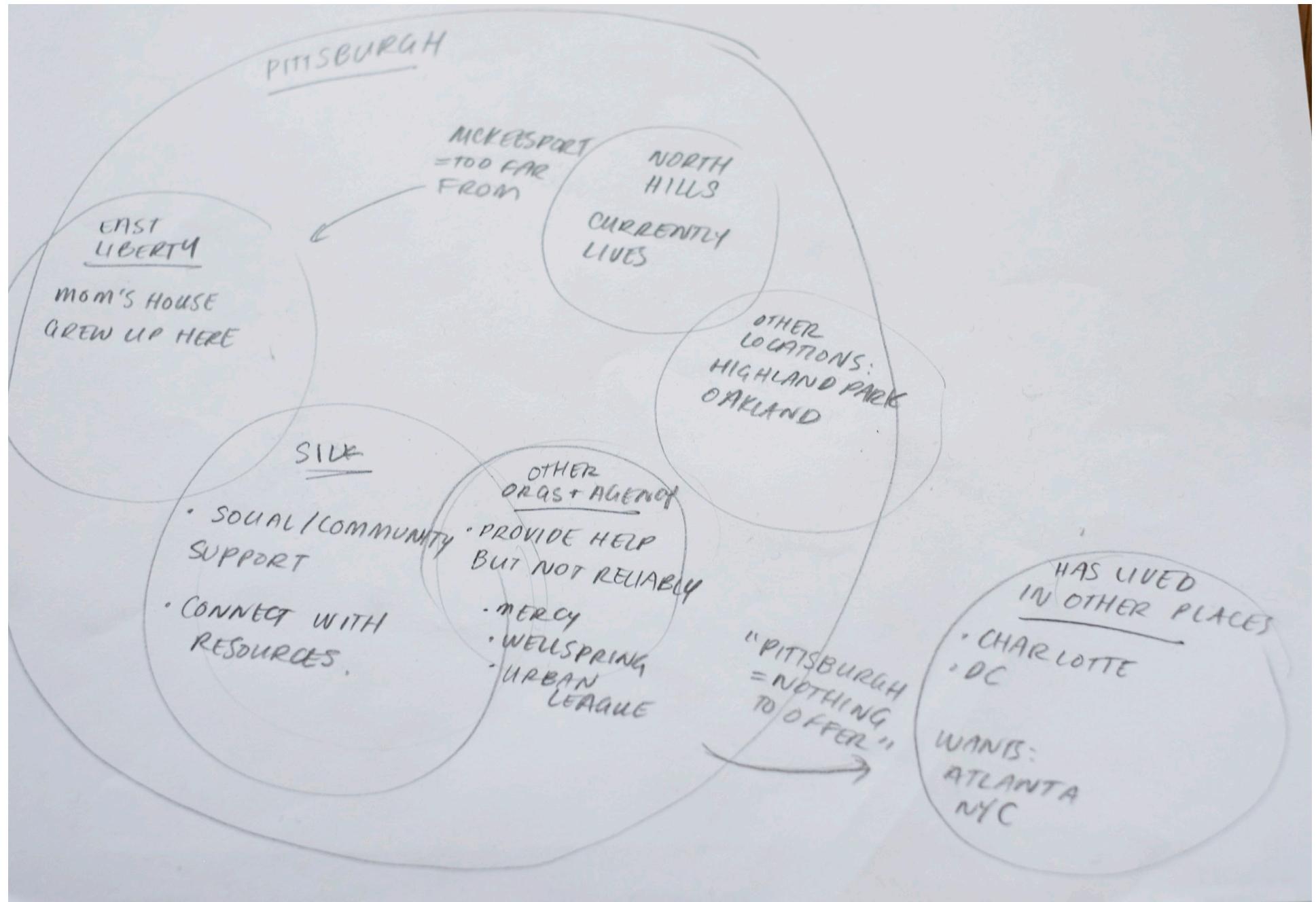
Contextual models demonstrate an individual's experience to allow for more in-depth analysis. Sequence models display the series of relevant events that took place over time. Flow diagrams represent the relationships an individual has with other people and organizations and identify where breakdowns have occurred. Cultural models place the individual in their social, political, economic, and geographic context to help researchers understand the influences entities have on their life.

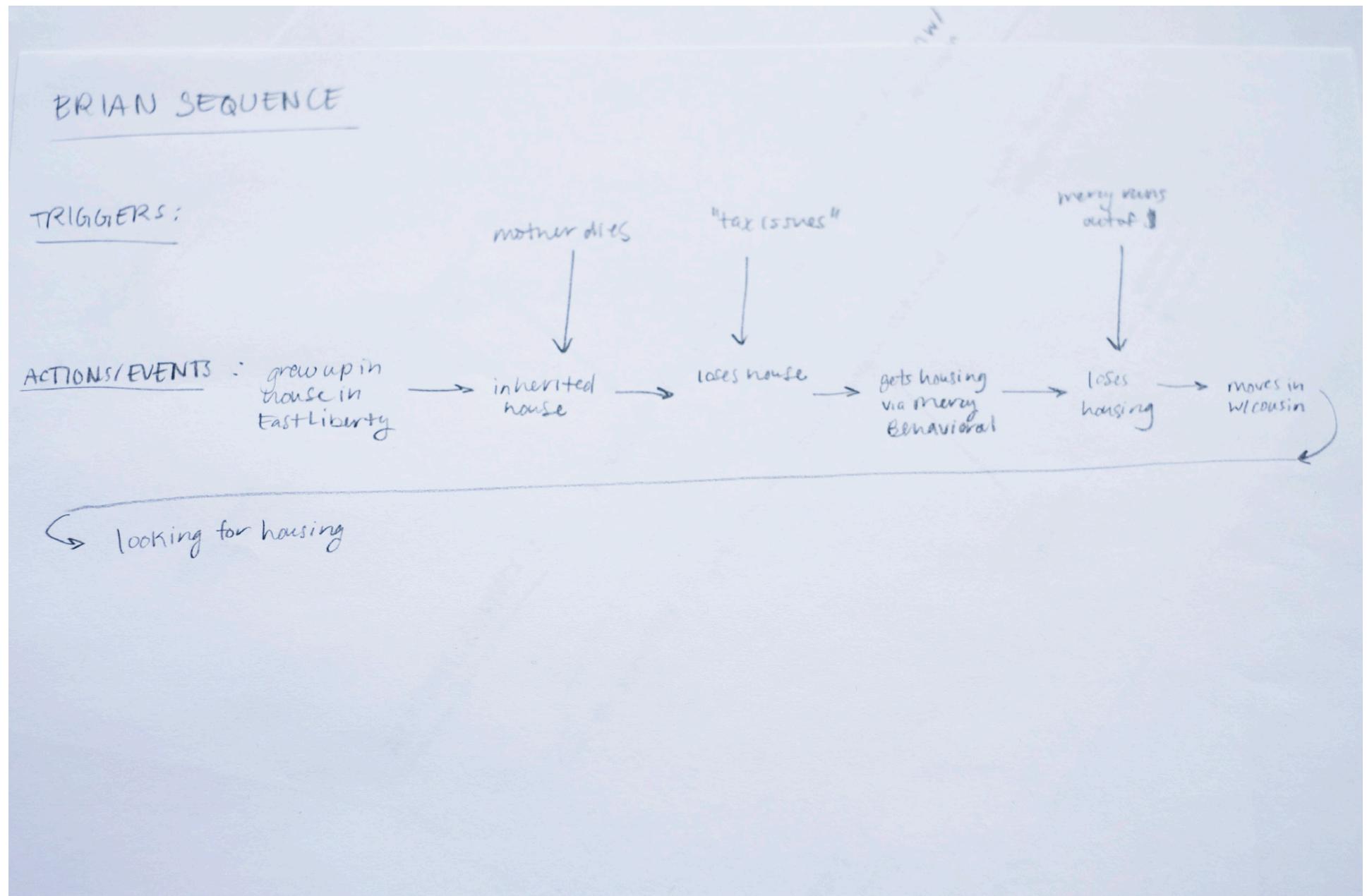


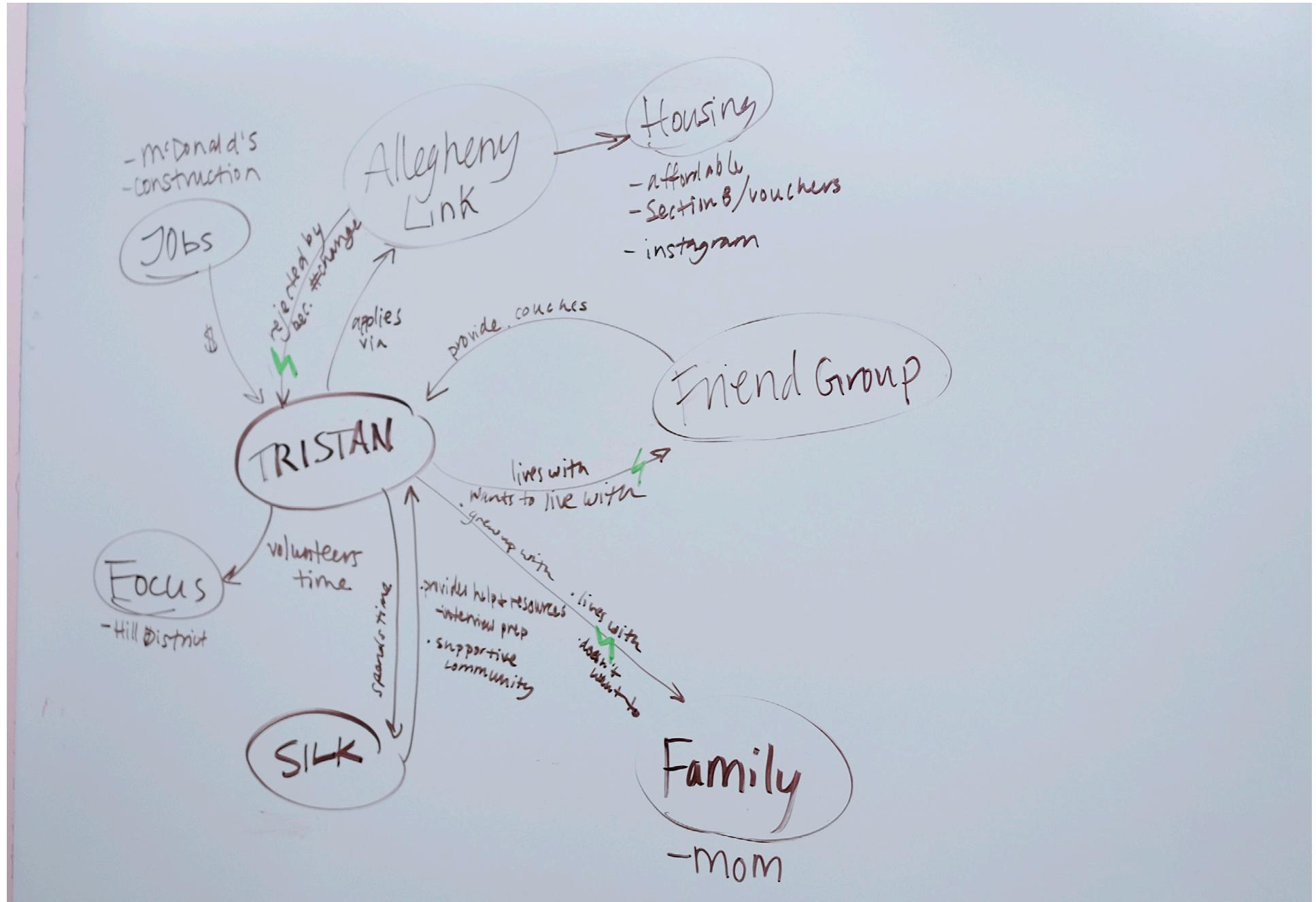


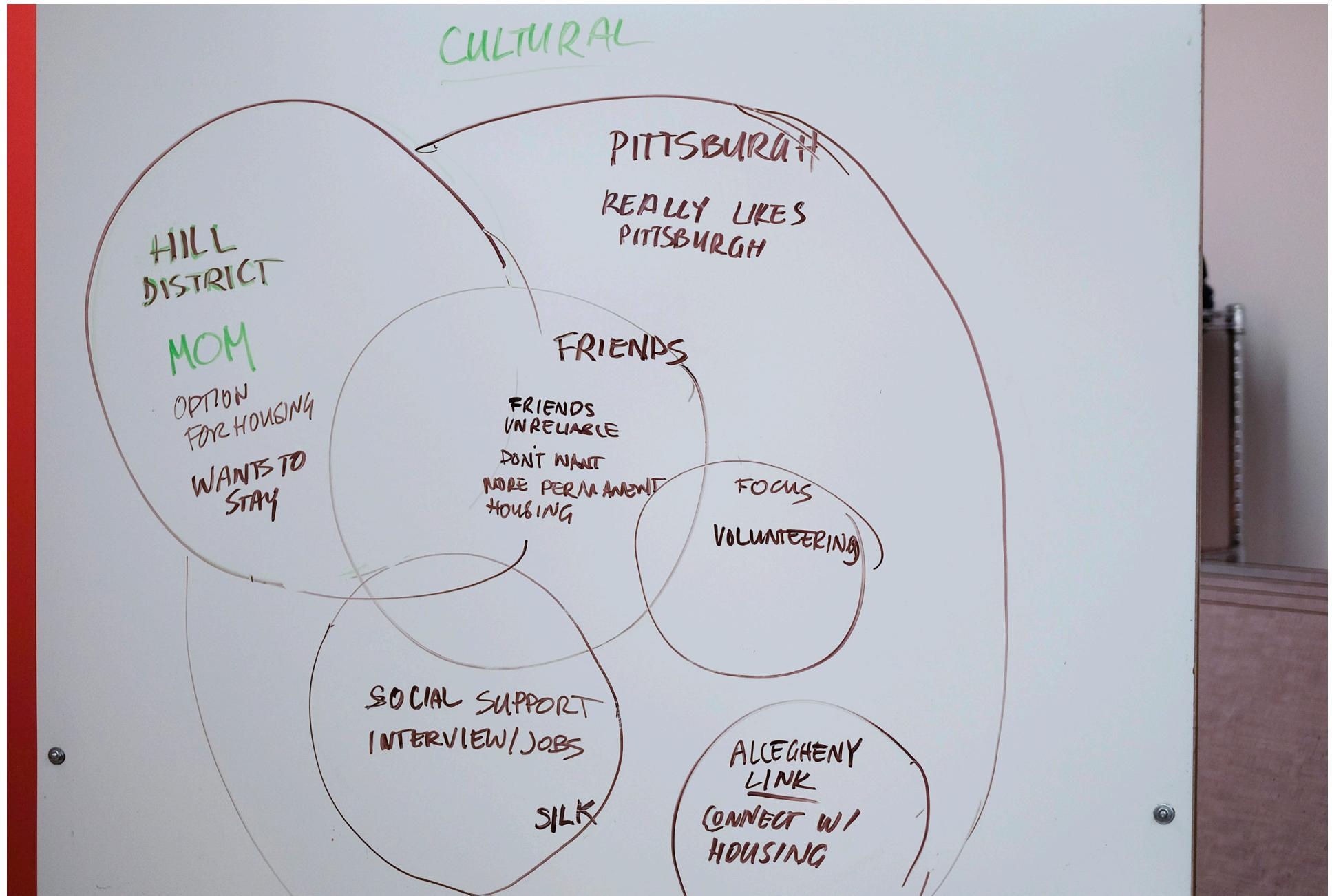


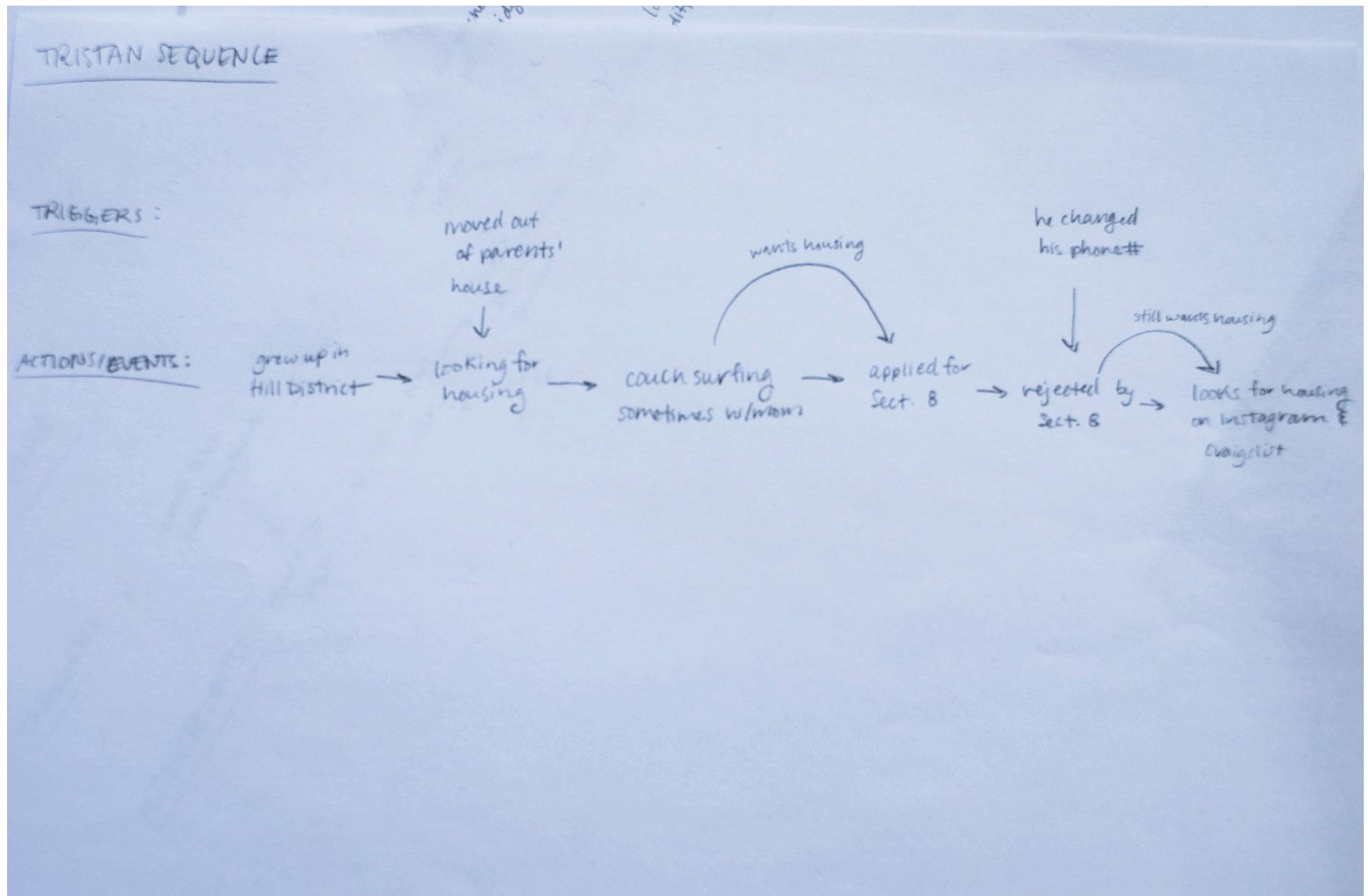


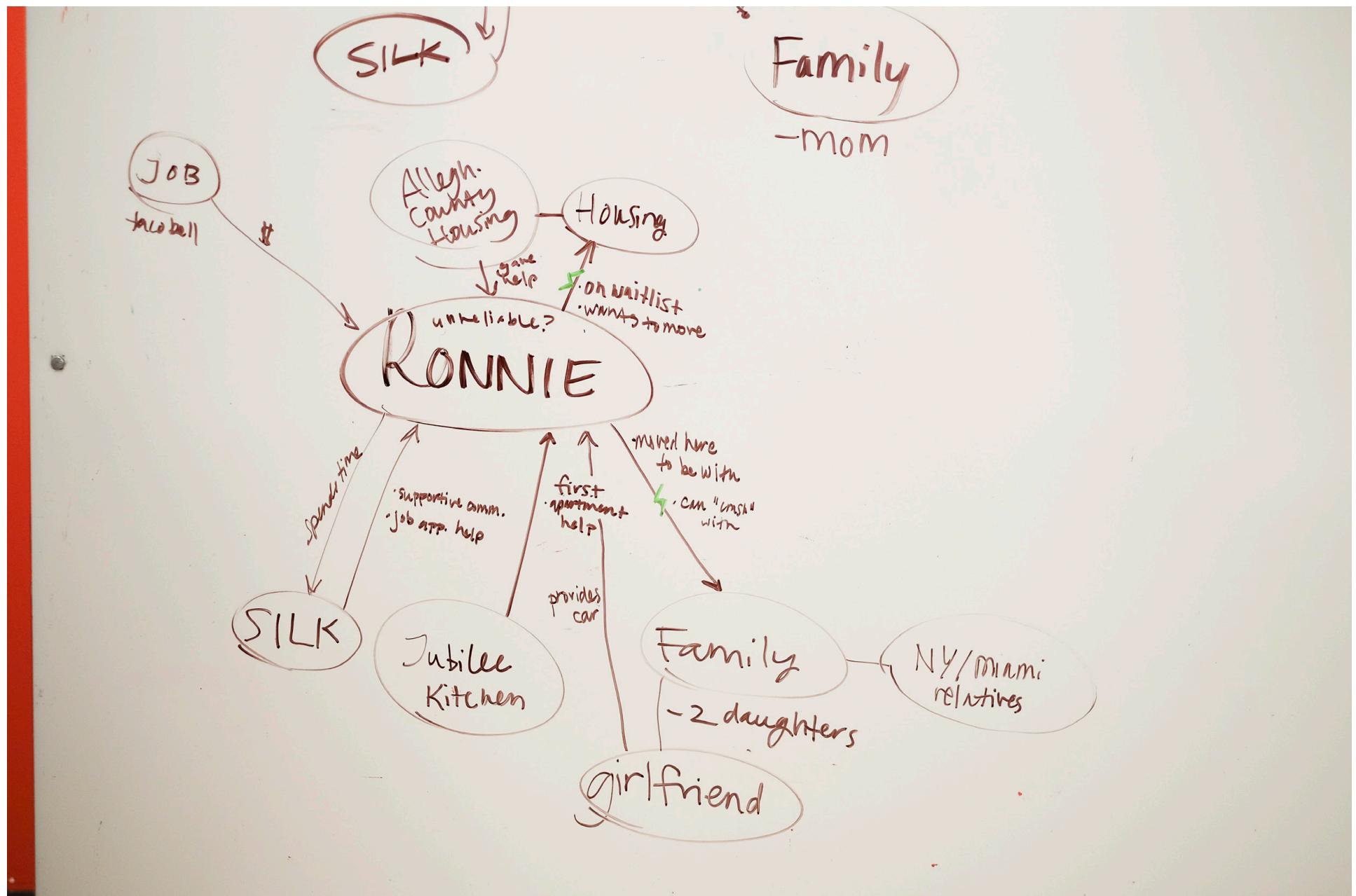


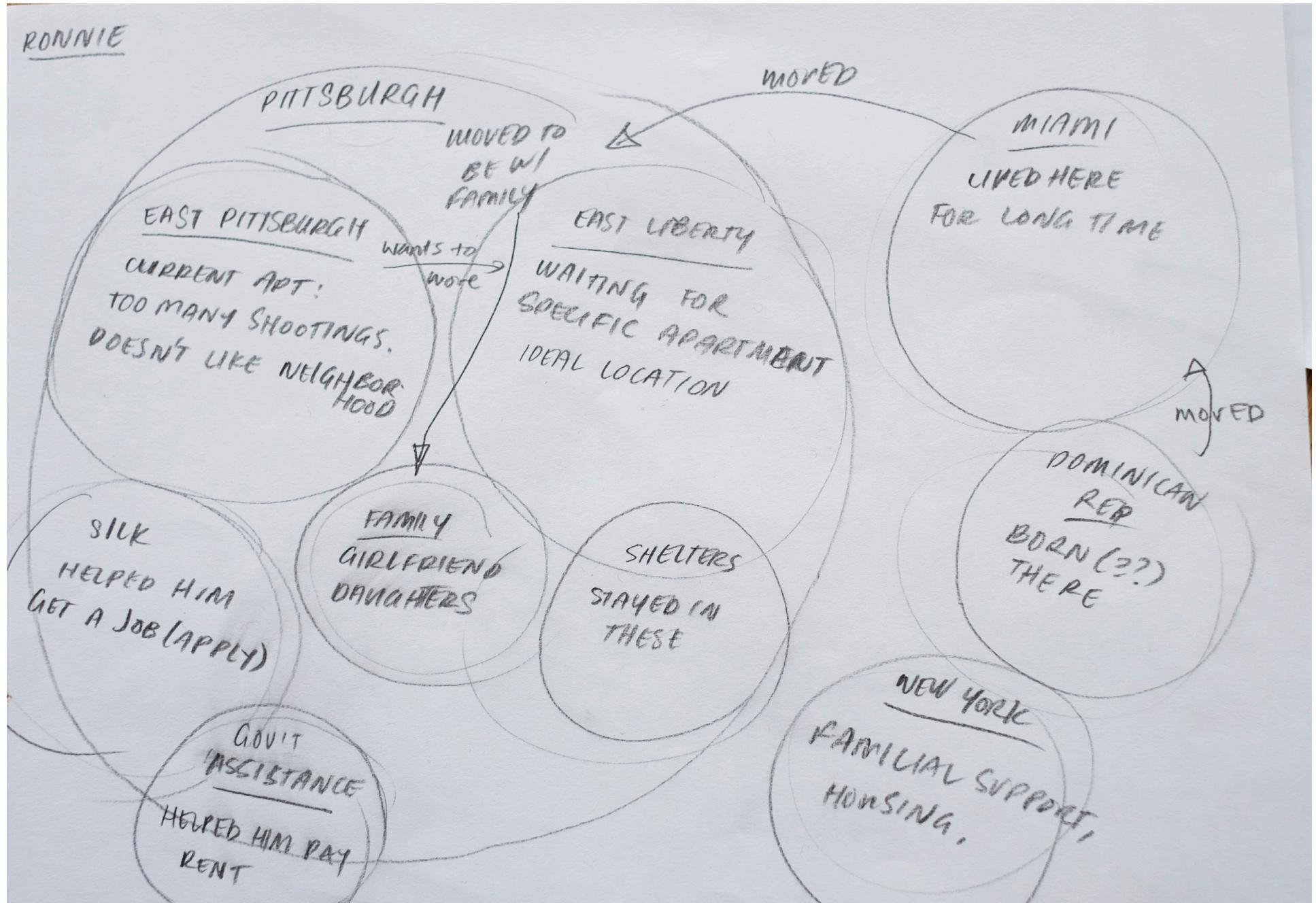


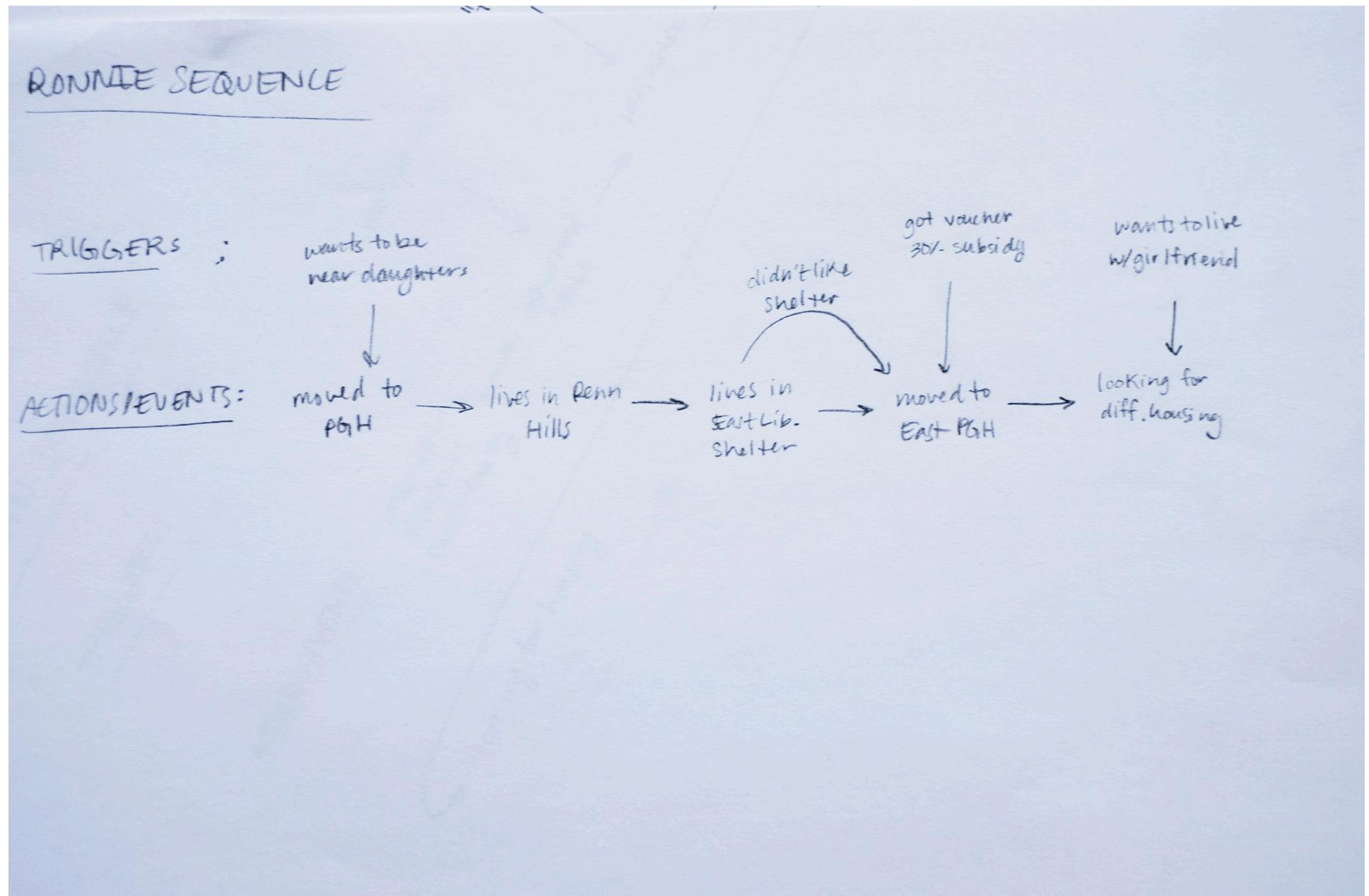




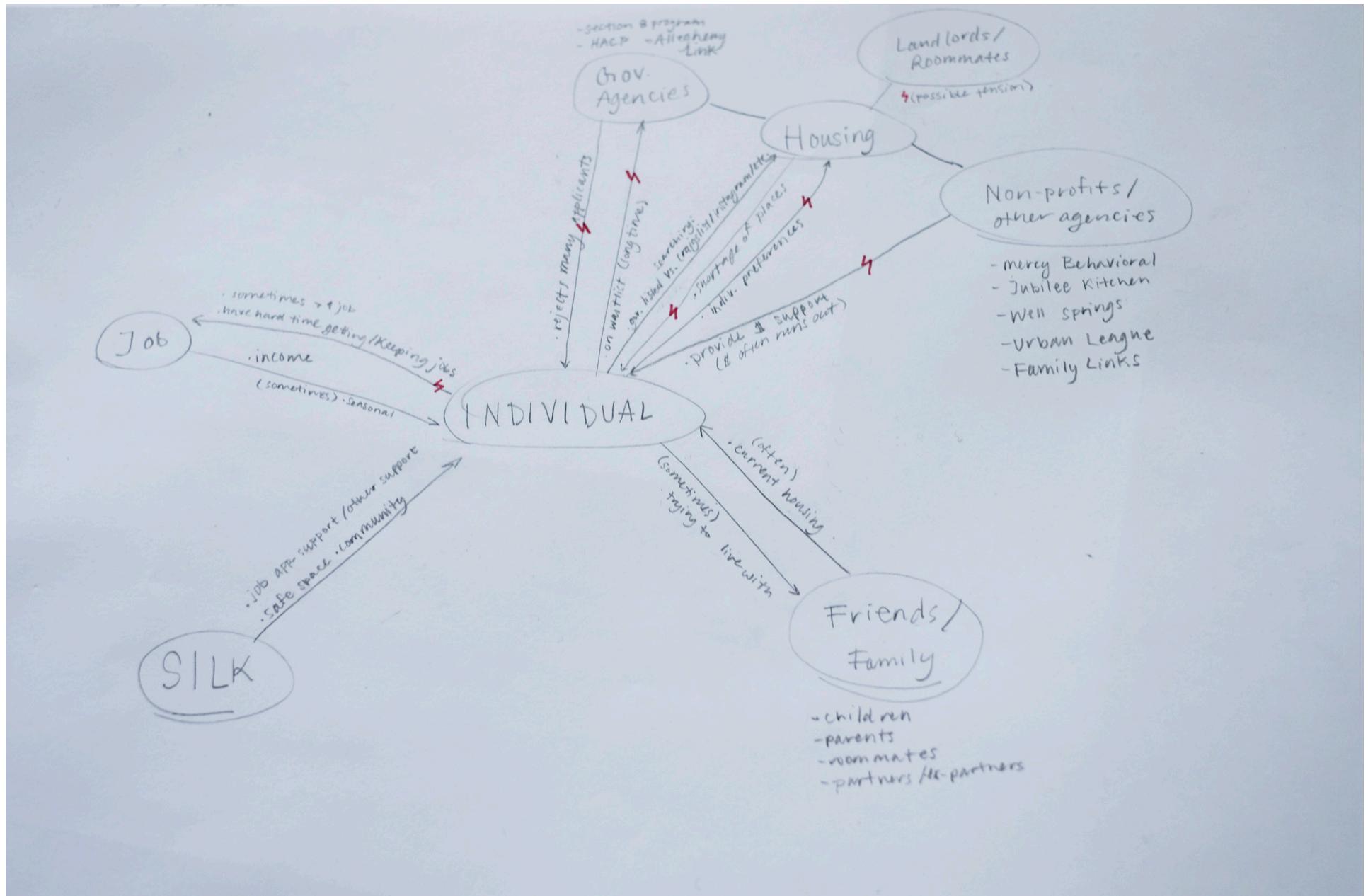




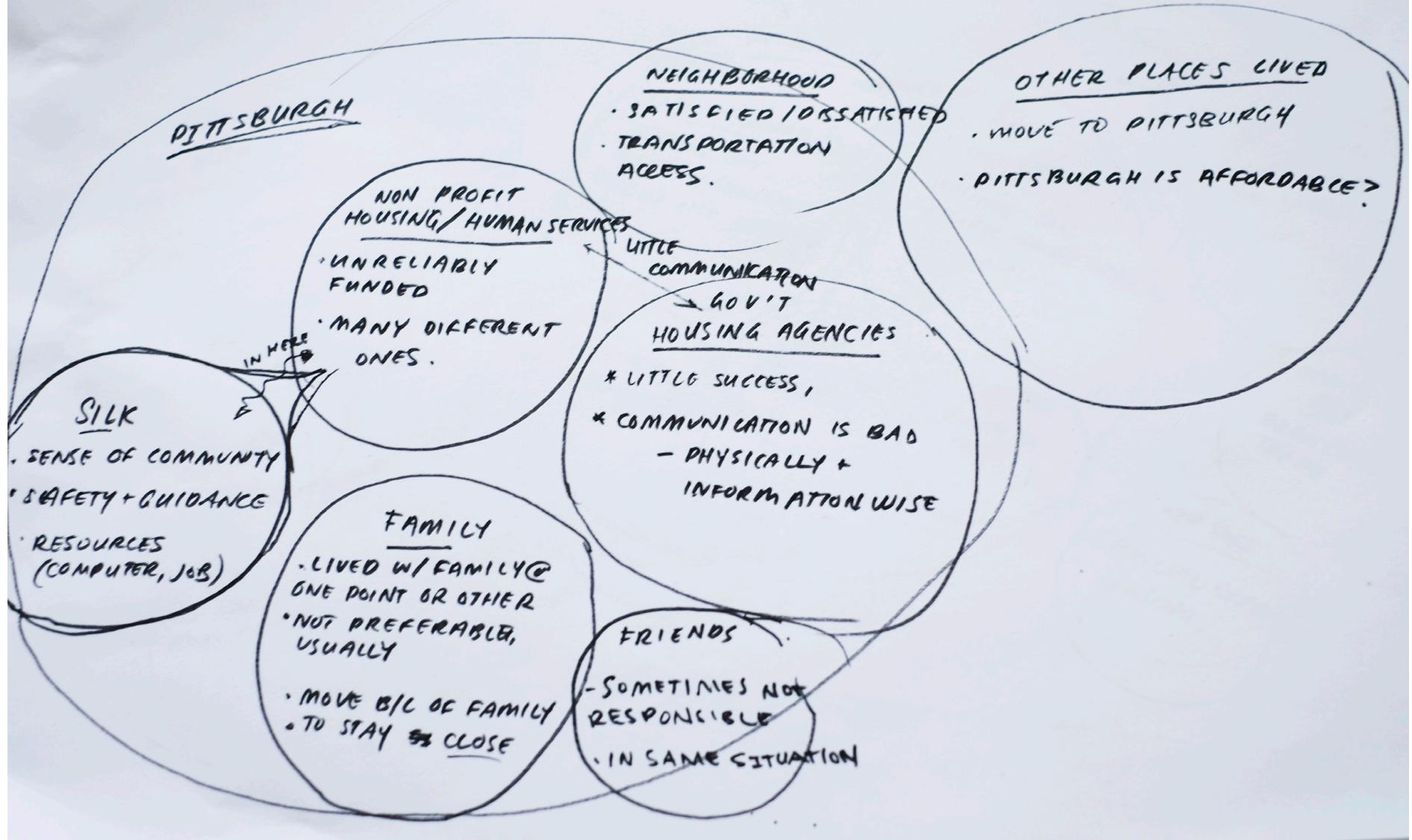




Consolidated flow



CULTURAL CONSOLIDATED



Team Biography

Our team is composed of four students from different academic backgrounds who all share an additional major in Human-Computer Interaction, a multidisciplinary “program that emphasizes technology for the benefit of people and society” (HCII Website).

Imogen Todd is a Libra with a primary major in Decision Science. César Neri is a Gemini with a primary major in Architecture. Anqi Wan is a Virgo with a primary major in Design. Nila Banerjee is a Libra with a primary major in Neuroscience.