

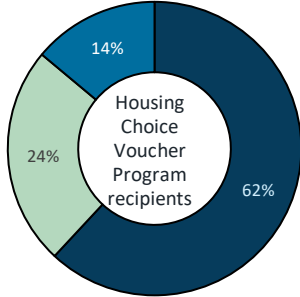


# BRIDGES COLLABORATIVE MEMBER PROFILE

## NestQuest Houston



Organization type: Fair Housing Organization

<b>Location:</b> Houston, Texas	<b>Population Served</b>	
	 <p>African American <b>100%<sup>1</sup></b></p>	 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Female head of household with school-aged children</li> <li>■ Students with disabilities</li> <li>■ Other</li> </ul>
<b>Size</b>		<b>Year Founded</b>
<b>3–8 employees;</b> serves <b>68 families</b> , with <b>249 people housed</b> for at least 12 months, and <b>181 students relocated</b> to high-ranking public schools.		<b>2017</b>
<b>Desegregation/Integration Focus</b>		



The focus is on **increasing housing mobility** for families who receive Housing Choice Program Vouchers to enable them to live in neighborhoods with high-performing schools, thus **expanding educational opportunities**



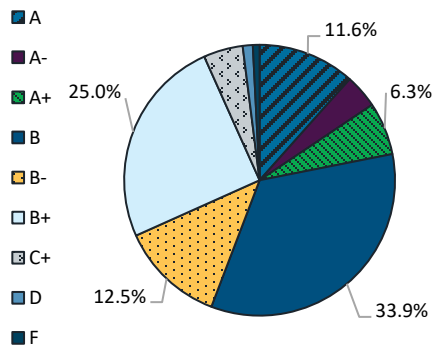
### How does NestQuest address neighborhood desegregation?

NestQuest is a fair housing organization in Houston that works with landlords, government agencies and families who use the [Housing Choice Voucher Program \(HCVP\)](#). The HCVP is a federal program designed to provide rental assistance to low-income families, the elderly, and people with disabilities. NestQuest’s housing mobility program addresses housing barriers for families who use the HCVP. Access to housing in well-resourced neighborhoods helps connect families to community resources and high-performing schools. However, property owners or landlords may avoid renting to HCVP recipients due to concerns about families’ financial stability. Renting to HCVP recipients also comes with additional requirements for landlords who need to comply with housing laws and carry out annual property inspections, experience waiting periods without rent, and provide the housing authority with documentation. In addition, legislation passed in 2015 in Houston protects landlords from city ordinances that require them to rent to HCVP recipients, so landlords can decide not to rent to HCVP recipients. As a result, HCVP recipients, who are disproportionately African American and Latino, often have a limited choice of neighborhoods in which to live. The NestQuest program implements key supports that better enable HCVP recipients to choose where to reside.

<sup>1</sup> At the time of data collection for this profile, 100% of NestQuest clients identified as African American.

### Exhibit A: NestQuest student enrollment based on Children At Risk school rankings (n=130 students)

As of October 2022, NestQuest supported 130 students attending schools across eight school districts. Over 90% of students attend a school with a Children At Risk ranking of A or B.



[NestQuest's approach](#) to desegregation focuses on creating housing and educational stability through a unique housing mobility program. Through NestQuest's Housing and Education Stability Program, the organization creates opportunities for HCVP recipients to lease in low-poverty, high-opportunity neighborhoods with high-ranking schools. This approach involves coordinating between public housing agencies (PHAs) that issue vouchers, families who receive vouchers, and property owners who receive housing subsidies when renting to HCVP recipients. To identify potential neighborhoods, NestQuest partners with Children at Risk—a research and advocacy nonprofit—to rank schools based on metrics such as grades, standardized test scores, student-to-teacher ratios, diversity-related demographics, and attendance rates.

NestQuest works directly with property owners to lease apartments in high-opportunity neighborhoods, then

NestQuest rents those properties to HCVP recipients. Most property owners that partner with NestQuest would not otherwise participate in the HCVP without NestQuest's involvement. By being financially connected to the properties, NestQuest assumes responsibility for paying rent on time to the property owners. NestQuest also works with PHAs to submit HCVP applications and lease documentation on behalf of its families and the property owners and assumes responsibility for required housing inspections. For property owners, NestQuest's housing mobility program simplifies the process of working with the HCVP. For voucher recipients, it reduces the burden of rent and the risk of eviction. NestQuest's program also offers families (a) financial assistance to bridge the gap between the voucher subsidy and property rent, (b) case management, and (c) pre- and post-move counseling.

Since its inception in 2017, NestQuest, through its unique approach to housing mobility, has grown from leasing five apartments to leasing 55. NestQuest and its partners have helped to house over 200 people and stabilize students' experiences at 44 schools across eight school districts.



### Spotlight: How do partnerships support NestQuest's approach to desegregation?

NestQuest's approach to desegregation builds on a public-private partnership model that addresses segregation at the neighborhood and school levels. This approach involves cultivating partnerships, characterized by trust and mutual support, with property owners and schools in the neighborhoods where NestQuest families live. Such partnerships are key to the success of the organization's Housing and Education Stability Program.

#### Partnering with property owners

Property owner participation is an integral piece of NestQuest's program. NestQuest guarantees timely rent payment and takes responsibility for complying with Houston Housing Authority's

regulations. In exchange, property owners and property managers agree to modify their rental practices, such as removing credit and income requirements for HCVP recipients.

When the program started in 2018, 10 property owners joined a 12-month pilot in which they each agreed to lease one rental unit to a NestQuest family. *“[That experience] changed [property owners’] perception of what [HCVP] was, who voucher holders were,”* shared Hannah Mannion, interim executive director of NestQuest. The pilot was successful and many property owners established longer term partnerships with NestQuest.

NestQuest currently has access to 160 properties in 39 different communities across the Houston metropolitan area that can be leased to HCVP recipients. A

partnership with the Houston Apartment Association helps NestQuest locate properties in high-performing school zones, and as a result, NestQuest families can live in safe neighborhoods with high-ranking schools and with amenities such as fitness centers, community spaces, and bowling alleys. Typically, HCVP recipients move every 12 months because of rent increases; however, NestQuest families experience 800 days of housing stability on average, and some have been housed stably for over 1,400 days.

### Partnering with schools

In the neighborhoods where NestQuest families find housing, NestQuest partners with schools to support the academic success and integration of children into schools. Currently, NestQuest families have children enrolled in 44 different schools across eight school districts in four residential counties. NestQuest has established two-way communication with several schools. At the parents’ request, NestQuest interacts with administrative staff at schools regarding enrollment, assessments, and attendance records. NestQuest’s family case managers have Masters level training in Social Work and work holistically with each parent and student to identify individual goals and challenges, and develop pathways to success. Case managers at NestQuest help families navigate school systems by helping students transition, ensuring consistent attendance, and by working directly with school registrars to streamline the school transfer and enrollment process.

Once students are enrolled, case managers monitor students’ academic progress and link them to school-based wraparound services such as counseling, English as a second language classes, after-school programs, diagnostics and supports for learning delays, and in-school tutoring. Case managers also help identify opportunities outside of school, such as internships. Through a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Houston Independent School District, NestQuest staff are permitted on school premises; and schools can share student data, such as attendance and grades, for children whose families partner with NestQuest. These data help NestQuest identify challenges their clients’ children may be experiencing and determine if they need supports such tutoring or advocacy.

For students that may experience housing instability, Houston ISD schools can also refer families to NestQuest for housing support to minimize disruption to students’ continued education.

Seven of the ten pilot participants renewed NestQuest’s lease to remain in the program for a second year. Two property owners from the pilot began working with the Houston Housing Authority independently, thereby allowing them to lease directly to voucher holders. This enabled two NestQuest families to effectively ‘graduate’ from NestQuest’s program.



## What factors support NestQuest's approach to desegregation?

NestQuest's approach to desegregation is facilitated by a clear **understanding of partner needs**, that has helped the organization design and offer services that are mutually beneficial to property owners, schools, and HCVP families. According to property owner John Boriack, NestQuest solves *"the conundrum of [property owners] having good homes that people need, but [people] need[ing] government assistance of some type to be able to afford it,"* a *"gap that [property owners] couldn't bridge on their own."* Through partnering with schools, NestQuest gives students what they need to ensure that NestQuest students have the support they need to fully experience available resources as they enter new schools in high-opportunity areas. The organization also places great value and invests significantly in **generating buy-in** and **establishing trust** among partners.

### Understanding partner needs

Working with property owners is critical to NestQuest's approach. Before initiating partnerships, NestQuest intentionally invests time and resources to understand the barriers to partnership that property owners experience. Hannah Mannion describes, *"We understood early on that we needed to understand the perspectives, priorities, and concerns of property owners if they were to come on board."* Outreach to property owners helped NestQuest recognize their hesitance to work with fair housing organizations due to concerns about HCVP compliance hurdles and related resource demands. Property owners were also concerned about revenue loss from lack of timely payments. John Boriack, president of Veritas Equity Management, which owns and operates six apartment complexes in the Houston area, has partnered with NestQuest for about 4 years, despite an initial hesitation based on past experience with housing programs. *"It seemed like in every other [housing program] case ... [t]here wasn't a lot of longevity. Or they would come in with all these promises of being easy to work with and that we would not have to change our business practices in a big way. And then ... [we] realized that [despite the partnership] we were still going to have to deal with all the section requirements out there."*

Working with schools helps NestQuest integrate students into their new schools. NestQuest reaches out to schools to better understand enrollment processes and identify programs that offer extracurricular activities and in-class support. To expedite enrollment, NestQuest works with registrar's offices to make things easier at their end. This has resulted in open communication with school staff, access to important and otherwise unknown information and resources, and more efficiency in managing administrative procedures for NestQuest families. For example, NestQuest's partnership with Houston ISD has helped them identify school programs for students with autism or disabilities. Moreover, since the district does not collect information related to students' housing instability, it was often challenging for schools to support students in a timely manner. NestQuest's consistent engagement with the school district staff paved the next steps for working collaboratively with Houston ISD to identify and support students that might be at risk of housing instability.

The partnership has also taught NestQuest to pay attention to changes in student volume due to redistricting or city development. For instance, an I-45 [highway expansion project in Houston](#) is displacing hundreds of families and potentially affecting where the children can attend school. For families that have either been offered a voucher and decide to move or have been identified by Houston ISD as having an unstable housing situation, NestQuest can leverage its school partnerships to advise on options and assist in planning for the relocation, if needed.

## Generating buy-in from partners

Hannah Mannion described how building connections with property owners persuaded them see the value that NestQuest’s program could bring them. Through dedicated outreach, including presenting at apartment association meetings and making phone calls to property owners and management organizations in high-opportunity neighborhoods, Mannion and her team consistently demonstrate to landlords how NestQuest addresses their concerns about engaging with the HCVP. For property owners, NestQuest’s involvement simplifies the process of HCVP compliance. In addition, NestQuest’s case management services offer property owners a “go-between” for residents and property managers when there are any conflicts or complications. According to Boriack, NestQuest’s services make it *“easier for housing providers to say ‘yes’ and [build] the program with property owners’ business operations in mind, so that property owners can participate in the program without having to make massive alterations to their current business systems and practices.”*

NestQuest’s outreach communication also emphasizes how property owners could improve students’ academic achievement and their daily lives. The consistency in rent, and the sense of having a positive social impact appeal to NestQuest’s property partners. John Boriack noted that *“the end result is we’re able to provide a home to a family and kids that need it, and give them that opportunity that they would otherwise not have access to ... So, it’s just a win-win solution all around that checks everybody’s boxes.”* NestQuest active outreach extends to policy-makers and advocates, and has generated ringing endorsements by Houston’s Mayor Sylvester Turner and support from City Council members, helping to build buy-in from partners. With NestQuest becoming a familiar name in property management circles, prospective partners are more willing to engage.

## Establishing trust with partners

In addition to designing services that support its clients and appeal to partners, NestQuest bolsters its partnerships through consistency, transparency, and trust. The organization invests significant resources on outreach and follow-up to maintain and grow relationships with property owners and school partners. According to Mannion, it means *“a lot of time on the phone and a lot of time showing up and continuing to adjust our approach...every organization is very different. There is no ‘off the shelf’ response.”* Starting with NestQuest’s pilot program, NestQuest was able to build trust and successfully request that property partners make more apartment units available for HCVP families.

To foster transparency, NestQuest collects data on outcomes and shares progress with all its partners. Every month, the organization sends out a [newsletter](#) highlighting the impact of the partners’ participation in the program, and over 3,000 people, including partners and funders, receive regular newsletter updates. For property owners, receiving information on the program’s achievements helps maintain the trust and commitment essential for sustaining the program. When working with the school district to transition students to higher ranking schools, NestQuest is careful to address school partner impressions that lower ranking schools are *“not good enough.”* By clarifying the resources that NestQuest clients need with school district partners—such as diagnostic capabilities for students who may have speech delay or classes to support students with learning disabilities—NestQuest maintains the transparency necessary for conveying their clients’ priorities.

NestQuest has worked to build trust with schools through outreach and working to better understand school enrollment processes and procedures including available programs, such as extra-curricular activities and in-class support, to help integrate students in their new schools.



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*“Every student [in our program], goes up on average two GPA points. Attendance goes up over 40% once they’re established and settled in. [NestQuest] has helped kids with things like access to diagnosticians [at school]. Kids were previously being told they were just naughty. Well, actually this student was partially deaf and couldn’t hear what was going on and was extremely distracted. We have a 100% graduation rate for our students. [We’ve] never had a student drop out.”*

– Hannah Mannion, interim executive director of NestQuest

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Over time, NestQuest’s partners have become champions of its desegregation work. As Boriack says, “Over the years, we’ve built a lot more trust with each other. The relationship has evolved a lot more from a client–customer relationship to more of a partner and partnership relationship, even an advocate relationship. I still catch myself being a great advocate for them all the time when I’m talking to local media or elected officials or other owners.”



## What are the challenges to NestQuest’s approach to desegregation?

### Partnership-related challenges

Bridging client needs though its partnership-based services is often challenging because of staff turnover in partnering organizations. When decision makers at an organization change, the partnership has to restart from scratch, which means grappling again with partners’ resistance and hesitancy. The biggest challenge for NestQuest is convincing property owners to allow NestQuest to be the leaseholder and HCVP recipients to be an occupant of the lease. Boriack notes that *“it’s really easy for property owners and managers to say ‘no’. Oftentimes the property ownership or management structure is very complicated, with... layers of approvals, and people don’t want to stick their neck out and go through the hoops of saying ‘yes’ to a program like this. They are afraid somebody up the chain is going to get mad about it.”*

Changes in property partners or property prices could mean housing instability for some tenants. NestQuest, as the leaseholder, must engage in ongoing negotiations with property owners on when leases are initiated or renewed and how much they can charge tenants beyond what the HCVP subsidy can cover, which can be challenging due to rising property prices. With 160 apartment units available for its clients, such negotiations are less difficult than they would have been at the pilot stage. However, with expanding operations and more clients to serve, NestQuest’s team is working hard to engage new partners while maintaining current relationships. This includes working with corporate leasing offices to help train their property managers on the NestQuest leasing process, and clarifying where this deviates from organizations’ internal leasing policies.

Staff turnover at schools also impacts partnerships. Typically at the end of an academic year, NestQuest has to restart conversations with new staff to introduce NestQuest’s program, explain the impact of housing instability on students, and the significance of long-term housing stability on educational outcomes. Renewing MOUs periodically helps mitigate issues due to staff turnover. Still, achieving and maintaining a shared understanding with Houston ISD is key to working cooperatively to provide NestQuest’s services to students that may benefit from them the most.

### Sustainability

One of NestQuest’s foremost concerns is getting funding to support the program’s sustainability. NestQuest has, in fact, been successful in fundraising and securing grants to expand its reach, and it is doubling its capacity by growing from four to eight staff members. Since its inception, NestQuest’s leadership has seen little transition and turnover, which has enabled the organization to learn from

past experience, streamline, and continuously improve internal processes and operations. With more clients to serve and increased organizational capacity, NestQuest’s program may benefit from securing other avenues of long-term funding, either through the city or county.

## Policy changes

NestQuest’s approach is sensitive to policy changes at the school district, county, and state levels. For instance, school choice policies allow families to attend schools outside of their zoned base school, but this means that some schools may reach enrollment caps more quickly than others. Indeed, several NestQuest families have moved to neighborhoods with high-ranking schools but have had difficulty enrolling their children due to limited school capacity. Recognizing the significant influence of education policy on the design and operation of its Housing and Education Stability program, NestQuest aims to add an Education Policy Intern to its team. Housing development and zoning policies also impact NestQuest’s work. Maintaining strong relationships with key housing stakeholders, such as property management companies, may help NestQuest and its partners advocate for policies that support housing mobility. John Boriack points out that partnering with organizations such as NestQuest helps demonstrate corporate social responsibility and may deter government intervention in property management and development. He explains, *“If property owners aren’t willing to participate in something that’s easy like this [NestQuest], then [their lack of participation is] going to make the public and elected officials much more likely to mandate participation in government housing programs of all different types. So, they need to see our willingness to participate in programs like this, and fulfill that desire that I know we all have - to make an impact in the community and be a part of the change.”*<sup>2</sup>



## Lessons learned

- **Understand and remove barriers to partnering.** Listening to partners’ concerns can aid in designing appropriate services and procedures and avoid adding processes that create operational hurdles.
- **Engage in ongoing outreach with partnering organizations at multiple levels of decision-making and implementation.** Initial outreach should focus on generating buy-in among leadership and decision makers at potential partner organizations. Ongoing outreach with programmatic and administrative staff can help maintain relationships and reduce disruption related to staff turnover or changes in leadership.
- **Create memoranda of understanding to enable data sharing.** MOUs clearly state objectives and expectations, and address challenges before proceeding with a partnership.
- **Establish trust with partners.** Invests time and resources to communicate regularly with partners, share progress on outcomes, offer services consistently, and be transparent in their operations.
- **Use consistent messaging and communication touchpoints to demonstrate social impact and the benefits of partnership.** Devise consistent messaging to show how the program will positively impact partners’ bottom line while also having a social impact, and provide regular updates to partners and funders.

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<sup>2</sup> In 2015, legislation in Houston required landlords to rent to HCVP holders. A subsequent lawsuit resulted in a policy that made it legal for property owners to choose not to rent to HCVP holders. See <https://www.texastribune.org/2018/11/19/texas-affordable-housing-vouchers-assistance-blocked/> for reference.



## References

NestQuest Houston. (2020). *Annual Report 2020*.

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