

## I. Overview

The focus group and interviews targeted eight specific populations:

The focus group and interviews were conducted with nine specific populations:

- a) Persons with Disabilities
- b) Persons Experiencing Homelessness
- c) Residents of Public and Subsidized Housing
- d) Residents of Market-Rate Housing
- e) Hispanic Immigrant Community
- f) Seniors
- g) Multifamily Developers
- h) Business Leaders
- i) Non-resident In-commuters

These populations were identified by the county to represent a broad range of community residents and partners so that the CHS could be well-informed by varied perspectives and priorities from throughout the county.

It is important to note that these focus groups and interviews were not intended to reach a representative sample of each of the populations. While attempts were made to ensure that a range of viewpoints could be expressed, the results from these focus groups/interviews are not intended to be interpreted as representing the opinions of the entire population (e.g. all persons with disabilities, all seniors). Instead, the results from the focus groups/interviews are intended to be used in combination with results from other elements of the housing study, including the countywide telephone survey (which is designed to be a representative sample of general county residents), discussions at public meetings, interviews with County staff and partners, and input from the stakeholder Advisory Group.

In addition, individuals who participated in specific focus groups/interviews likely reflect a set of views or opinions that go beyond the narrow definition of the group. For example, participants in the focus group of seniors were also residents of market-rate housing in the county. Some individuals in the focus group of persons with disabilities were also residents of public and subsidized housing. The individuals who participated in the focus groups/interviews were not asked to comment only on issues related specifically to the target population they were identified as part of; rather, the goal was to have broad-ranging conversations about housing needs and solutions.

All focus groups/interviews summarized in this draft report were held between October 2017 and May 2018.

## II. Cross-Cutting Findings

While there were issues raised in the individual focus groups/interviews that were specific to certain groups, there were also a number of topics that were discussed repeatedly across the focus groups.

- *Prince George's County as a relatively affordable community.* While housing affordability was a challenge for many focus group participants, there was also broadly-shared sentiment that Prince George's County was relatively more affordable than many other parts of the region.

Furthermore, many focus group participants thought that housing affordability and housing choice—including more affordable homeownership options in Prince George's County compared to other places—distinguished the county and was something that should be highlighted and valued. The business community noted that one problem is the *perception* that housing costs in the County are high because the Washington D.C. region is expensive, generally. Many focus group participants suggested that the County's affordable housing options should be promoted as a strength, particularly when working to recruit businesses.

- *“Perception” issues.* There was a commonly-held belief among the individuals we spoke to that Prince George's County continues to have a perception problem. It was widely thought that investors, businesses, and potential new residents perceive that the county is not a good place to invest, not a good place to live and work, and generally lacked amenities. School quality and local government accountability were mentioned specifically as factors that many perceive as negatives, even as there have been improvements in the county. The perception issue suggests a challenge to attracting private-sector investment, attracting and retaining employees and building market-rate housing.
- *Local government communication and accountability.* Developers, public housing residents, seniors, Hispanic immigrants, and residents with disabilities all expressed significant frustration with the real or perceived lack of communication from County staff and elected officials regarding both personal housing concerns, as well as overall policy initiatives. In general, staff are perceived as insensitive and unresponsive to resident concerns and residents feel a sense of disrespect or lack of accountability from the county. This poor communication and lack of responsiveness erodes residents' trust in County government to address and adequately meet residents' needs.
- *Lack of information and misunderstanding about County programs.* Many focus group participants did not know about the range of County housing programs available, and many had incorrect information about the County's programs. There was some consensus that the process to access housing assistance in the county was unnecessarily complicated and not transparent. This finding suggests a need to provide better information and education about County programs and to make it easier for eligible individuals and families to access housing services.
- *Housing quality.* In several focus groups, including focus groups with Hispanic immigrants, residents of public and subsidized housing, and residents of market-rate housing, concerns about housing quality and a lack of code enforcement were big issues. After housing affordability, issues related to poor quality housing were a priority for many, including stories of apartments with mold and mildew, delays on repairs, and unresponsive property managers and building inspectors. These concerns about housing quality suggest a need for the county to focus on code enforcement and building inspections in its current stock of both subsidized and unsubsidized rental housing.
- *Taxes.* When the issue of taxes came up, most focus group participants—including developers as well as residents—commented that high taxes in Prince George's County are an impediment to development, impact affordability, create obstacles to economic development investments, and make it harder for existing residents to remain in the county. There was a general sense that the

tax burden in the county disproportionately falls on residents and residential development, and that the county needs to broaden its commercial tax base.

- *Within County variation.* There was often conversation in the focus groups/interviews about how different neighborhoods were within Prince George's County, and there was a recognition that the needs and opportunities in the county varied tremendously depending on neighborhood/submarket. Many commented on the difference between being in an incorporated city in the county (better services, better responsiveness) and being in the unincorporated portions of the county. The recognition of within-county variation suggests a need to look closely at housing needs and opportunities, as well as potential solutions, at the sub-county level.

### III. Key Findings from Individual Focus Groups/Interviews

Detailed summaries of each focus group and set of interviews is included in Section IV. Below is a high-level summary of key findings from each of the target populations.

#### *i) Persons with Disabilities*

- The County does not do enough to ask questions about the specific housing needs of persons with disabilities. As a result, persons with disabilities are required to spend a lot of time and money traveling to check out apartments and often not able to find housing that meets their needs. Many continue to live in suboptimal housing situations (e.g. with family members or roommates) because they are unable to find accessible housing.
- Homes that are defined or marketed as "accessible" do not always have features that actually allow persons with disabilities to live in the units, suggesting a need for clear and consistent standards for accessibility throughout the county.
- Residents with disabilities feel consistently disregarded by County staff. There is a general sense that the County does not want to help people with disabilities living in the county.
- The waitlist process for County housing assistance is complicated and confusing. Communication from County staff about housing assistance and waitlist procedures is unclear and often contradictory (e.g. different information from different County staff).
- Overall, there are an insufficient number of affordable units available to persons with disabilities in the County, and it is very difficult to get appropriate modifications. While owners of large market-rate rental buildings are generally responsive, it is difficult to get owners of smaller properties to make necessary accommodations for persons with disabilities.

#### *ii) Persons Experiencing Homelessness*

- There is a broad range of individuals and families experiencing homelessness in Prince George's County, from families with children to formerly incarcerated individuals to LGBTQ youth to senior citizens. For people in each group, the obstacles to housing can differ, and the housing and service needs can be quite varied.

- There are several issues common among people experiencing homelessness, including the need for employment opportunities, the need for credit and financial counseling, and, quite simply, the need for more affordable housing. A critical obstacle to employment is a lack of education and training.
- Prevention is the most important—and most cost-effective—strategy for addressing homelessness in the county. Prevention strategies include providing support and services to individuals and families at risk of homelessness, working with landlords who are housing at-risk populations, and modifying current housing assistance programs to better target individuals and families at highest risk of homelessness.
- The number one need articulated by homeless service providers is more affordable housing, including housing for individuals and families, group homes, transitional housing and shelter beds. A particular type of housing needed could be single-room occupancy (SRO) housing to accommodate homeless men.

*iii) Residents of Public and Subsidized Housing*

- Public housing residents generally are on the waitlist for years before a unit becomes available. For many, it is challenging to remain on the waitlist for so long, as life events, including moves outside of the County, put individuals' eligibility at risk.
- Poor housing quality is a serious issue in public housing units, including issues with mold and mildew, pests, elevator outages, and general lack of maintenance.
- While rent is affordable, other expenses were difficult to afford, including costs of repairs to the unit and costs for other non-housing necessities, such as medical expenses. In addition, rent increases can be unexpected and difficult to manage.
- There is a sense that there is a lack of accountability and respect for residents on the part of County and Housing Authority staff.

*iv) Residents of Market-Rate Housing*

- Residents take a lot of pride in being Prince George's County residents. The County has a number of advantages—including location, housing affordability and choice, recreation options—that it should do more to promote and be proud of. The County needs to come at housing, planning and economic development issues from a perspective of "strength" rather than from a "deficit" perspective, by promoting all of its advantages rather than focusing on weaknesses.
- Gentrification is a big concern among residents from two perspectives. First, people moving out of D.C. into Prince George's County puts added pressure on neighborhoods. And second, neighborhoods within Prince George's County are gentrifying, making it challenging for existing county residents to remain in the community.
- The County should negotiate with developers to provide affordable housing and other community benefits.

- The County should explore different types of housing options. There are opportunities in the county to increase density and encourage mixed-use development, as well as other housing types including “missing middle” housing and accessory dwelling units.

v) *Hispanic immigrant community*

- Hispanic immigrants living in Prince George's County value the opportunity to live in housing that is close to bus transit, grocery stores and other shopping, and other services and amenities.
- Poor housing quality, and a lack of sufficient inspection and code enforcement to resolve issues, is the biggest challenge. Residents had a wide range of complaints about the quality of their units and their buildings, and were concerned about a lack of responsiveness from property managers and County inspectors. There is a need for Spanish-speaking building inspectors to ensure that health and safety issues are addressed.
- Property managers have threatened residents, saying that ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) would be present at their tenant meetings, or that the County was going to fine them. This creates a difficult environment for some Hispanic immigrants.
- Tenants need a stronger voice in the County, with greater County support for tenants' right organizations. There is often a lack of understanding among renters about their rights and what they can expect from landlords and property managers.

vi) *Seniors*

- The ability to own a home in Prince George's County has been very important. While the County provided many seniors with the opportunity to become homeowners and gain wealth through homeownership, there is concern that those homeownership opportunities are becoming fewer for younger residents.
- The majority of seniors would like to stay in their current home as they age. Many anticipate that modifications would be necessary to remain in their homes as their mobility becomes more limited, and they were not sure they could afford those modifications.
- For those interested in moving, there are few options in the county that are affordable to seniors living on fixed incomes, though there were options for higher-income, active adults.
- High taxes were a major concern for seniors, and many see taxes as an impediment both to growth in the county and to attracting new residents.
- Health care costs and availability were also issues important to Prince George's County seniors. For many, the greatest concerns as they age were around having access to health care services, either in their home or in a facility.

vii) *Multifamily Developers*

- There is strong demand for multifamily rental housing in Prince George's County, particularly among households earning 60 to 100 percent of area median income (AMI)—“workforce

housing.” There is still a perception issue in the County that has made it challenging to attract investors to rental housing projects. Furthermore, developers feel that not every submarket in the County is ready for market-rate residential development.

- Demand for higher-density neighborhoods with social amenities is on the rise, and there are few opportunities for that kind of housing in Prince George's County currently. Looking ahead, it would be beneficial to encourage higher-density, transit-accessible, and mixed-use development in the county.
- The ability to build new housing varies in different parts of the county, and the viability of a particular project often depends on local political support. Developers commented on the need for consistent and predictable standards through the County.
- Challenges to building new multifamily housing in the county include high taxes, the lengthy development review and approval process, parking and retail requirements, and a lack of financing.
- Developers suggested several strategies the County could undertake to promote residential development, including property tax abatement and impact fee reductions for new multifamily housing, streamlining the development review and approval process in the County, a pilot to demonstrate the potential of repurposing commercial buildings as housing, establishment of a formal public land policy to encourage the use of County-owned land for housing, and a dedicated source of funding to support the development of affordable housing in the County. For-profit developers voiced tentative support for an inclusionary zoning program, but cautioned that the County should look at the full financial package.

viii) *Business Leaders*

- There was broad understanding among participants in the focus group of business leaders that having a sufficient supply of affordable and appropriate housing is important for attracting and retaining workers in both the private and public sector. It is important for the County to provide housing options for *all* and not just affordable housing for low-income households. Prince George's County should be a first choice for all new workers in the Washington D.C. region, not just for residents looking for lower-cost housing.
- While housing is an important issue for business leaders, there were several other challenges in the County that focus group participants agreed were bigger obstacles to attracting economic development. Two specific issues were raised: school quality in Prince George's County and a lack of economic development tools to support small businesses and entrepreneurs in the County. A more general issue had to do with on-going perceptions not only about opportunities in Prince George's County but also perceptions about housing cost in the County that are based on information about the high-cost region rather than the more moderate-cost local market.
- There was some feeling among members of the business community that there needed to be more leadership and vision on the part of elected officials in the County so that innovative strategies could be implemented to strengthen both the County's economy and the housing stock. Anti-density attitudes, including preferences for single-family homeownership over

multifamily rental housing, has been a key factor in the inability of the County to attract the types of residential development that younger workers are looking for.

- The business leaders focus group offered several specific recommendations for expanding housing options and affordability in the County. These specific actions included: local, public investment to spur walkable, mixed-use development around Metro stations; expanding use of TIF and PILOTs to support more affordable housing; expansion of first-time homebuyer programs, particularly through targeting of the existing stock of condominiums in the County; and establishing metrics and a method for tracking progress towards meeting housing and economic development goals.

*ix) Non-resident In-commuters*

- People who commute into Prince George's County come from a wide range of places, many fairly far away and not connected to the county by good transit options, including Anne Arundel County, Charles County and Calvert County in Maryland and places outside of Northern Virginia in Virginia.
- The most common reason in-commuters said they did not live in Prince George's County was that he or she individual lived in his or her home before taking the job in the county. About a quarter said they would not consider moving into the county.
- Many in-commuters think the county does not have good housing options, including a lack of affordable housing options, a lack of high-amenity housing options, and a lack of housing in safe neighborhoods.

## IV. Preview of Full Task 3 Report

The full Task 3 report will be released as part of the final Comprehensive Housing Strategy document. The Task 3 report will include:

- Full write-up on methods used to recruit participants and to facilitate the focus groups
- In-commuter survey instrument and summary response tables for each question
- Summary of the participants in each group/interview (non-personally identifiable)
- Detailed accounts of each focus group conversation, including more context on each of the findings noted above
- Full list of recommendations that emerged from each focus group discussion