



Houston and Harris County Housing Conversation

Event Report

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We thank the sponsors of the event. The following policy suggestions come directly from participants in the conversation.

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Introduction

The Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University, the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), and CSH are pleased to present this report synthesizing major themes from the Houston and Harris County Housing Conversation. The convening was made possible by the coordinated efforts of the co-sponsoring organizations, with support from the Houston Endowment and JPMorgan Chase Co. We also want to thank the members of the event steering committee, as well as the expert commentators from Houston and beyond. Finally, we want to thank the more than 200 public stakeholders who attended the event. For more information about the event itself, including the opening data presentation, agenda, and key term glossary, please visit kinder.rice.edu/houstonhousing.

We applaud the entire group's effort to engage the complicated subject of housing in concrete ways. The work of addressing housing needs across the entire region requires a collaborative effort between government, the private sector, service providers, advocates, and residents. Each of these groups have important and unique roles in creating and managing an effective system. This includes lauding past work, acknowledging the shortcomings of the current situation, and jointly pursuing the implementation of a housing approach that works for all.

The housing conversation was facilitated by CSH and followed their fishbowl charrette model. This approach brings in national experts and surrounds them with local stakeholders and community members. The process encourages equal participation among these groups with every stakeholder having a space to voice opinions, thoughts, and concerns.

The conversation was not intended to reach consensus. Rather, it was an attempt to identify major issues around housing, to bring forward productive ideas for addressing them, and to highlight topics that stakeholders must grapple with further. In this way, it represents an important effort to create shared knowledge around housing issues in Houston and Harris County. The pieces pulled from the conversation and tied together in this report pinpoint places of energy and contention within this ongoing conversation. They represent touchstones drawn from a wide range of perspectives that can be used to inform future plans and processes.

The effort to adequately house all residents of Houston and Harris County in safe and affordable housing is an urgent regional matter. Everyone, regardless of income, wants housing that is affordable to them. Addressing housing needs for people with lower incomes, however, remains challenging. Hundreds of thousands of residents live either in homes that are substandard or where mortgage and rental costs consume too much of their overall household income. Heavy housing costs leave families financially stretched and vulnerable to a slew of other problems.

Key Data

- Across all incomes, 305,905 households in Harris County face severe housing problems (lacking kitchen or bath facilities, overcrowding, or high costs).¹
- 214,665 households in Harris County make less than 80% of the median income and spend more than 50% of their total income on housing.²
- The Houston-Woodlands-Sugar Land Metropolitan area provides only 18 affordable units for every 100 households that are extremely low income (below the poverty or less than 30% of median income.) The third worst ratio of all U.S. metro areas.³

Residents in every municipality from Houston to Humble are seeking better, more affordable housing options. While some population groups—especially non-white residents, low-income households, and immigrants—confront a preponderance of the problems stemming from inadequate housing, the issue extends beyond those groups. Insufficient, unaffordable housing crosses racial and ethnic lines and touches families from many income levels. It is not an urban or suburban issue, but a regional one. Housing is a keystone system, connected to many other elements of an individual's daily life—from education to transportation to healthcare. Because of its pervasiveness, attempts to address the county's housing needs offer the opportunity to improve the lives of residents and improve the efficacy of governments throughout Houston and Harris County.

The fishbowl conversation illustrated that while a number of organizations and individuals have worked tirelessly to address the housing needs of the region, much work remains. The energy in the conversation showed that this is a critical time for the region to grapple with housing. Finding ways to bring citizen engagement in to concert with the actions of the public and private sector is essential if the region is to reach solutions. No one group can solve this issue alone.

With the scale and scope of the problem and the importance of the solution in mind, the goals of this report are threefold.

First, its aims to reflect key pieces of the conversation around housing in Houston and Harris County that emerged during the event. This description helps establish shared knowledge of the issues and opportunities connected to housing. It also provides a rich document to which many stakeholders contributed. Because of this it stands as a guidepost that all stakeholders can return to in order to inform future efforts.

Second, it provides officials and agencies in Houston, Harris County, and other county municipalities with a toolbox of ideas about how they might approach the issue of housing in a more productive, cooperative, and publicly engaged manner. With numerous area

¹ United States Census Bureau, Comprehensive Housing Affordability Strategy 2009-2013, Harris County.

² Ibid.

³ National Low Income Housing Coalition, "The Gap: A Shortage of Affordable Homes," March 2017.

jurisdictions considering strategic housing plans and undertaking initiatives tied to housing, the suggestions contained here provide potential action steps and identify issues that may need additional attention in future plans.

Third, the report identifies ways to encourage solutions-oriented community engagement that is tied to the experiences and needs of residents. It offers residents, housing advocates, and service providers with an opportunity to give input into the housing conversation on an equal footing with elected officials and policy makers. It also tasks citizens with remaining productively engaged in the conversation and working with the public and private sectors to help create a housing system that works for all.

Throughout this report, the term housing system is used as a catchall to describe the overarching collection of actors and structures involved in the funding, building, managing, and use of all types of housing in Houston and Harris County. This term is used primarily in areas where ideas require the engagement of all stakeholders. Specific actors will be tagged in the report where appropriate.

Highlighting Interconnected Themes

Given the breadth of the issues surrounding the topic of housing, the event itself was organized into three broad discussion topics:

1. Housing for People
2. Housing for Place and Community
3. Houston and Harris County Housing Priorities

These topics allowed for a wide-ranging conversation. The insights and commentary offered ideas for how government, developers, advocates, service providers, and residents could work together and separately to advance efforts to provide safe and affordable housing across the housing continuum.

Rather than analyze the key points of each of these discussions individually, this report draws out the major themes that emerged in and across the discussions. The themes are based on the input of the panelists and community stakeholders who participated in the daylong housing conversation.

The seven cross-cutting themes identified include:

1. Shared Understanding
2. Shared Vision/Goal Setting
3. Tools and Policies
4. Public Accountability around Housing
5. Authentic Community Engagement
6. Political Will and Leadership
7. Interwoven Issues

Each section will begin with a brief introduction of the theme. This will be followed by a list of key observations drawn from the conversation. Some points note areas of contention drawn out during the event that will require additional attention and discussion. Others stand as concrete policy steps pulled from the experiences of experts and members of the public. Both types of observations should inform the subsequent efforts undertaken by officials, residents, public and private sector housing providers, and advocates.

Shared Understanding

Stakeholders in the conversation reached a consensus that a great need exists for shared understanding of issues around how the housing system operates and how residents navigate it. This mutual understanding should include basic definitions of terms and programs, allow for the creation and display of accessible housing data, offer in-depth acknowledgement of what affordable housing means, and help dispel common misconceptions about the place of subsidized affordable housing and those who use it. In order to be effective, this knowledge sharing must work to overcome language barriers and the challenges inherent to getting people of different races, income levels, and educational levels involved in the same dialogue.

For example, the housing conversation surfaced tension between homeownership and rental housing, as well as biases and misperceptions about owners and renters. Education around such issues offers an opportunity to ease tension and highlight the complexity of the housing system.

Attempting to create this type of mutual knowledge also opens the door for all stakeholders to grapple with the ways past public actions have shaped current circumstances. Historical underinvestment in low-income communities, whether in housing or basic infrastructure, creates consequences for the residents of those communities that are different from those faced by citizens in better served communities. Historically rooted and ongoing issues around race, segregation, and unequal access to opportunity for non-white residents likewise must inform this discussion. Acknowledging these differences is key to ensuring that all involved in the housing conversation see how improvements across the housing continuum could benefit the whole region.

Outlined below are key ideas and strategies drawn from stakeholders in the conversation about how to develop shared understanding about the housing system:

1. **Establish shared terms and knowledge of the housing system.** The public documents and engagement processes of public agencies and housing providers should include less jargon, clear definitions of key terms, and direct information about accessing existing programs in multiple languages. People need to know what exists within the system and what they qualify to use.
2. **Provide publicly accessible data.** Public agencies should continue to collect data about housing needs and existing supply and work to improve its accessibility. This data should cut across the region and touch on the full housing spectrum.

- a. A coordinated data approach should be developed between public agencies, universities, service providers, advocates, residents, and private developers.
 - b. Public entities should consider presenting data in visual ways to highlight the spatial aspect of this issue. See the example of Policy Link's National Equity Atlas or the efforts undertaken by cities like Denver and Portland.
3. **Dispel misconceptions about publicly subsidized housing and clients.** Advocates and service providers should work with residents and elected officials to show the breadth of subsidized housing clients, types of units, and range of public subsidy. FHA loans (subsidized mortgages for homeowners) and Housing Choice Vouchers (subsidized rent for tenants) are both forms of public sector housing support, but are viewed very differently. This effort could help reduce opposition to new projects if done proactively.
 - a. Create a countywide education campaign to support housing affordable for all. Increase shared understanding that housing is for everyone. People of different income levels need different solutions, but everyone needs a place to live.
4. **Create information about housing needs by geography.** Documenting the affordable housing supply and demand by proximity to employment centers, services or political jurisdiction, similar to the approach taken by HousingWorks Austin for each city council district, can show how need exists across the city and county.
5. **Continue public conversations on housing and interconnected subjects.** The fishbowl event did not start the conversation about housing in Harris County and it should not be seen as a culmination. Rather it should encourage continued conversations that grapple with topics the first fishbowl was unable to cover such as health, safety or education.
6. **All participants in the housing system must acknowledge that existing publicly subsidized housing does not match the need.** To support innovative and transformative efforts to create more housing options in Houston and Harris County residents and officials must recognize the urgency of the housing problem and the limitations of the current supply.
7. **All participants in the housing system must recognize housing as an equity and justice issue.** Residents of different racial groups, income levels, and physical abilities face unique challenges in their efforts to access safe and affordable housing. Creating a system that works for all requires recognizing the ways that historic and current policies and social practices limit the options of non-white, poor, and immigrant groups. Public engagement efforts and housing policy documents should mark this reality and act to rectify disparate impacts.
8. **All participants in the housing conversation must acknowledge that different residents see housing and community in different ways.** The fishbowl discussion

made it clear that there is no single idea of what a home or community should look like. Creating a space where various conceptions of home and community can be heard, especially from residents with the least political influence, can ensure the formulation of plans that include many people's experiences.

Shared Vision

Effectively tackling the county's housing challenges requires a collective vision of action. Actors involved with housing must discuss and agree upon a set of bold goals that match the urgency of the county's housing needs and that result in programs with measurable outcomes. The crafting of this vision should include participation from stakeholders across the housing system.

Housing plans and the process of developing them provide an essential space within which to create such a shared vision. A set of goals should be developed in the early stages of any plan and should stem from shared understanding. The vision should inform the tools and policies pursued by stakeholders and should establish benchmarks for evaluating those programs.

Outlined below are key ideas and strategies drawn from stakeholders in the conversation about what a shared vision for achieving regional housing goals should include:

1. **Establish clear, bold goals.** The urgency of the housing situation is clear. Houston and Harris County should match that urgency with a set of goals that can significantly address the need.
2. **Recognize that housing efforts benefit all.** The success or failure of a housing effort is not isolated. It is not just residents who benefit from an effective system of affordable, safe housing. The adequate provision of housing would benefit the whole county. If the cost of providing support services to residents is reduced, jurisdictions can provide other services more efficiently. Businesses and employers can benefit from having employees closer to work and with more money to spend. Property owners, renters, and homeowners all benefit from stronger communities.
3. **Acknowledge equity as a primary aim of all housing efforts.** Houston and Harris County celebrates the diversity of our people, but too rarely do we acknowledge that within that diversity not all residents are presented with equal opportunities. Equity should be of paramount importance. Housing policies and goals should aim to create upward mobility across all groups.
 - a. The same caveat applies to residents in different housing situations. Renters and homeowners should be treated as equals and their needs should be addressed with equal commitment.
4. **Work to secure investment for communities across a variety of sectors and needs, not just housing.**

5. **Develop strategies that recognize different housing needs by geography, population, income, and other factors.** Customized, neighborhood-level approaches should be created in conjunction with community input.

Tools & Policies

Throughout the housing conversation, stakeholders highlighted tools and policies that align with the community engagement and accountability ideas discussed below and that could help advance housing policy in Houston and Harris County. However, it was also noted that there is no silver bullet. Stakeholders recognized that an array of tools must be used to effectively address the many issues we face. It is likewise critical that any tools and policies pursued mesh with the shared vision and housing goals developed by stakeholders in the region.

The experts involved in the conversation made it clear that central to the implementation of effective tools and policies is an attached effort to identify the resources local governments control or can raise that can be dedicated to housing. They also suggested that duplication of efforts should be avoided. Finally, all participants in the conversation suggested that local leaders draw lessons from other cities about how to effectively deploy new policies.

Efforts such as Houston's current endeavor to develop a housing plan are critical. Comprehensive planning ensures that housing tools and policies are in place from the beginning and that all stakeholders have a uniform and clear understanding about how and when certain tools and policies will be used. In addition, better and more transparent data is critical to ensuring the right policies are being implemented.

Outlined below are key ideas and strategies drawn from stakeholders in the conversation about what tools and policies may contribute to achieving the region's shared vision around housing:

1. **Develop a balanced, multi-pronged approach to bringing housing to both high opportunity areas and underserved communities.**
 - a. Encourage more partnerships between Houston and Harris County, including a joint fair housing assessment.
2. **Expand current local funding streams for affordable housing.**
 - a. Houston could expand amounts dedicated to affordable housing in future general obligation bond referendums.
 - b. Houston could extend the policy for dedicating a portion of TIRZ financing for affordable housing from petition-TIRZ's to all TIRZ's. The city could then dedicate those funds to an affordable housing trust fund subject to an annual planning process with public input and oversight.
 - c. Expand funding in the city and county budgets for affordable housing to bring funding for housing on par with other public infrastructure programs such as parks and libraries.

- d. Expand down-payment assistance and rehab assistance programs in the city and county.
 - e. Many homeowners are facing displacement because their property taxes have become too high. Investigate the possibility of tax abatements to help mitigate displacement concerns of long-term, low- or fixed-income residents.
3. **Adopt new and innovative funding streams and financing tools.** Public funding will never be enough to address the housing needs of our region and is at risk of decreasing dramatically. Thus, stakeholders should engage corporate partners and philanthropy to invest.
- a. Public-private partnerships such as the investments made under Mayor Daley to support the Plan for Transformation for the revitalization of Cabrini Green and other public housing in Chicago offer one innovative example.
 - b. Ensure that some investments flow through the community by supporting the work of community development corporations and other non-profits.
 - c. Create a tax abatement program to incentivize private development to include affordable housing. See, for example, the tax abatement programs in Chicago and New York City.
 - d. Consider creating a Housing Trust Fund similar to Austin, which places a portion of all public land sales into the trust.
 - e. Research Transit Oriented Development (TOD) approaches such as Denver's, where a \$24 million fund with multiple funding streams allows the city and surrounding counties to rapidly respond to opportunities to acquire and land bank existing multifamily housing in high opportunity and gentrifying neighborhoods
4. **Leverage public land assets that the city and county control.** Conduct an inventory of underutilized or surplus publicly-owned land and identify opportunities for utilizing the land for affordable or mixed-income housing.
5. **Adopt tools to preserve affordable housing and protect against displacement in areas with rising property values and redevelopment pressures.**
- a. A number of resident stakeholders raised the issue of displacement and expressed a desire to have the option to remain in their current communities.
 - b. Houston and Harris County can support the establishment of neighborhood community land trusts (CLT). Stakeholders in the Third Ward as well as Near Northside are already considering this. Guadalupe Neighborhood Development Corporation's CLT in Austin is a successful case study.
 - c. Houston and Harris County could put long-term resale restrictions (via community land trusts or deed restrictions) in place in all housing receiving government subsidies.
 - d. Local officials could ask the Texas Legislature to extend Homestead Preservation Districts to Houston and create districts in low-income neighborhoods of Houston facing redevelopment and displacement pressures.

6. **Broaden opportunities for tenants with Housing Choice Vouchers (a rental support program) and vouchers through other programs to live in higher opportunity and desegregated communities.** This is a contentious issue that was brought up repeatedly in the conversation. There are a number of ways to address pieces of it, but a variety of ideas exist around how best to do so.
 - a. Local governments can support efforts to make it illegal for landlords to discriminate against Housing Choice Voucher holders.
 - b. Houston could pass an ordinance requiring any project that receives public funds in any form to not discriminate based on source of income.
 - c. Local governments could provide funding for a tenant mobility program similar to the Inclusive Communities program in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. Cities and county can facilitate partnerships with private landlords to accept tenants with rental assistance and provide other services to tenants.
 - d. Houston and Harris County could work with the U.S. Housing and Urban Development Department (HUD) and housing authorities in the region to offer higher fair market rents in higher opportunity neighborhoods for Housing Choice Voucher holders.
 - e. All agencies could expand fair housing testing and enforcement of source of income discrimination protections in federal Low Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC)⁴ properties.
 - f. Require landlords in any housing developments receiving city or county subsidy to accept a percentage of tenants with Housing Choice Voucher vouchers.
7. **Explore the Establishment of a 9% LIHTC set-aside for Houston.** This would help to improve stability and greater certainty for developers and focused leverage for city financing, thus providing additional flexibility for community engagement opportunities.
 - a. Los Angeles successfully pursued this option.
 - b. This is potentially contentious given the importance of the funding and the competitiveness of the program to the entire region.
8. **Establish a new development initiative that encourages inclusionary housing and mixed-income principles in market-rate developments.** The initiative could be similar to the Downtown Living Initiative, but should include affordable housing set-asides and a diversity of housing options for different income brackets. The program should consider a range of land-use incentives, such as relaxed parking requirements, increased density and other land use incentives.
9. **Increase support of community development corporations (CDCs).** Beyond direct financial support, local government and philanthropy can support programs, training and development opportunities that help capacity building efforts of local

⁴ Low Income Housing Tax Credits are one of the largest funding streams for affordable housing in the United States. The credits are given to developers and then sold to help finance affordable housing projects.

CDCs. This will provide much needed support for growing critical housing programs such as real estate development and down-payment assistance.

10. Encourage neighborhood level planning that is tied to community revitalization efforts and funding through the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA).

11. Reform and expand code enforcement and livability standards in Houston and Harris County.

- a. Houston should consolidate code enforcement programs for single-family and multi-family rental homes into one city department.
- b. Houston and Harris County could adopt a monthly fee structure to provide an additional funding stream for code enforcement (for example, Austin charges a fee on city utility bills, Los Angeles charges a per unit fee for multifamily owners) to make the inspection program revenue neutral.
- c. Houston and Harris County should heighten multifamily habitability standards to better align with the standards in the International Property Maintenance Code.
- d. Consider tenant support services such as an education effort around tenant rights (similar to Austin's BASTA program) or a tenant relocation ordinance for tenants displaced from units shut down for code violations.

Public Accountability around Housing

Community sentiment in the housing conversation highlighted a desire to see public agencies and officials remain open about efforts around housing and related services. Residents articulated a set of concerns about a lack of accessible information about the financial resources devoted to housing. While public officials document this information through existing compliance mechanisms, the observations of public stakeholders suggest that public agencies could continue to work to improve accessibility and responsiveness. This ongoing work is central to building trust with residents.

Enhancing accountability efforts and systems helps ensure the housing system is monitored, evaluated, and improved in ways that benefit clients while still achieving compliance targets. A tension point that surfaced during the day was related to the desire for a system that is based on dignity and respect for the people who need more support to achieve safe, affordable housing.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that accountability efforts are not one-sided. Community stakeholders must continue to engage in and support the efforts of public agencies. This includes talking with elected officials about the importance of accountability and calling for the resources to make it possible. The public must also be held accountable in its efforts to participate in the regional conversation around housing in productive ways.

Stakeholders in the housing conversation tied the conversation about accountability to the ongoing discussion in Houston to create a comprehensive housing plan. The planning effort

offers a venue through which public agencies and officials could establish clear accountability and progress measures.

Outlined below are key ideas and strategies drawn from stakeholders in the conversation about how accountability can be built into the housing system:

- 1. Publicly document all existing housing programs and funding streams.** Each public entity should work to improve the ways they share information about housing funds. While official documents such as the HUD's required Consolidated Plans provide this information for federal funding sources, additional, more detailed and directly accessible documentation could be beneficial, especially around the use of local funds.
 - a. Any future comprehensive housing plans should include a detailed discussion of how a jurisdiction plans to use its housing funding streams from local, state, and federal sources.
- 2. Create housing advisory boards** in any jurisdictions where public funds are used in discretionary ways. For example, Houston's tax increment reinvestment funds for affordable housing are overseen solely by the TIRZ boards and the city. Adding a citizen advisory board could add transparency and public input to the ways that funding is allocated.
 - a. The creation of these entities must be done in a way that ensures the citizens serving are committed to proactively pursuing solutions across the region, rather than acting to block housing opportunities in particular areas.
 - b. Houston's Community Development Advisory Committee already provides public feedback to the city on its Consolidated Plan and Fair Housing practices. The role of this committee could be expanded as has been done in Austin to include input on funding sources such as housing bonds or other programs.
- 3. Establish a housing report card** or another accountability tool in each major jurisdiction. Numerous stakeholders in the conversation highlighted a desire to have a consistent and accessible progress tracker. Such a report could measure housing outcomes, track changes in resident needs, and provide information about pending projects and the use of financial resources.
 - a. Northeastern University's Greater Boston Report Card is an example of a report card tool.
 - b. In conjunction with the effort to provide data on the housing system, consider using Houston's GIS Open Data portal to house data for tracking and analysis.
- 4. Ensure that public agencies working in the housing system are flexible and adaptable to needs of residents.** Housing is not isolated from other community-level service needs such as code enforcement, public safety, or refuse collection. Public departments that work in neighborhoods and within the housing system must recognize their interconnection, help facilitate the service needs of residents

across departments, and work with other departments to match services rendered to services required.

- a. Within housing, public and private housing providers must continue to consider programs that serve a variety of housing needs, not just the creation of new housing. Maintenance and repair programs can have a similarly significant impact. These programs can often more effectively help respond to historical lack of investment in certain areas.

5. **Require public reporting on housing efforts and evaluation of attendant services offered by agencies.** A number of fishbowl participants reflected on the fact that distrust or doubt exists among residents about the effectiveness of various public agencies and service providers. Consistent reevaluation of the services being rendered and open communication with residents about the efficacy of those services would help build trust with clients.

- a. Require that public agencies give periodic evaluation of progress on housing efforts to city council, community boards/commissions, and particular stakeholders involved in initiatives.
- b. In conjunction with resident feedback, periodically evaluate programs serving the public.

Authentic Community Engagement

The most effective engagement is purposeful. It should come early in the process and help to shape policies or plans. If engagement efforts can be tied into other elements captured by the housing conversation such as the crafting of shared visions or program accountability and effectiveness, then residents and participants are far more likely to be engaged. A key aspect of this work is to make the process accessible to those who do not often participate by making it simpler, ongoing and tied to concrete steps. The process should consider helping people understand what's happening by meeting residents where they are in their knowledge level and context. Community engagement also provides buy-in for communities themselves – it helps them claim their space and impact the political process.

This work is difficult and takes time. It cannot be contained to a single step, but has to be ongoing. The work-in-progress nature of this practice was evident even in the conversation itself. The overwhelming majority of participants offering comments during the event were White or African American. In a city and region where the Hispanic population is approaching the majority, increasing the diversity of the conversation and making it accessible to all is essential.

As with the creation of effective programs and accountability, public officials and agencies cannot pursue this effort alone. Resident stakeholders need to push for adequate funding for these efforts and come to the public sector ready to work toward solutions that lead to improved housing for all across the whole region.

The challenge of using citizen engagement effectively is to overcome the limitations of a “not-in-my-backyard” (NIMBY) mentality. Rather than coming to public engagement efforts looking to limit opportunities or to say “no” to all options, citizens need to willingly engage in a process aimed at finding solutions that work for every neighborhood and every resident.

Inclusive engagement at the beginning of any process minimizes duplication of effort and ensures that what is developed genuinely reflects the needs of the community. In addition, housing is not siloed within a community, but rather affects and is affected by other critical issues such as transportation, economic development, and healthcare. Community engagement must also include all voices – renters, homeowners, landlords, businesses, policy makers, practitioners, and developers – and bridge gaps between these groups. Individuals often fill multiple roles - a resident speaking for the community may also be a practitioner. There is no single “voice.”

Outlined below are key ideas and strategies drawn from stakeholders in the conversation about how to best pursue citizen engagement:

1. **Provide information and space for individuals to engage effectively.** Residents must be able to comfortably acknowledge the issues they face and discuss strategies to address these issues. It is difficult to reach everyone but efforts should always be made to do so.
 - a. Fit community engagement into the community’s schedule. Examples include evening meetings for working residents, innovative meeting structures, and attending community events.
 - b. Connect with stakeholders who are neglected by these engagement processes. Several stakeholders who were renters voiced concerns that they were viewed as less important participants. This issue came up repeatedly. Making sure all residents are included and valued is essential.
 - c. Offer community level surveys in multiple formats (i.e. online, paper) and languages.
 - d. Engage trusted partners, such as community development corporations and the faith-based community, to reach communities that are often less represented, such as Hispanics.
 - e. Develop innovative strategies that bridge the gap between different stakeholders. Employ people from a community to collect information or encourage participation within that community.
2. **Review best practices from other cities** that have developed authentic community engagement strategies and engage with community organizers working in those cities.
 - a. North & Northeast Portland, in Oregon
 - b. Housing NOLA, a housing plan and implementation process in New Orleans
3. **Develop community engagement guidelines** and encourage Houston and Harris County to implement them.

- a. Guidelines and other engagement processes should be built in a way that allow for meaningful engagement, but that also support policy initiatives that aim to provide adequate housing for all. Participation should start from a place of getting to solutions, rather than limiting projects.
- b. The guidelines could help encourage support for community development corporations and other advocates working to engage communities.

Political Will & Leadership

Addressing the challenges of housing in Houston and Harris County will require leadership from officials at every level of government and active participation from residents, developers, advocates, and service providers to support shared goals. The urgency of the issue, expressed by stakeholders and as evident in the data, requires that residents push officials to fully account for housing needs and provide the political backing needed to take action. Officials must be willing to use all tools at their disposal and to consider the creation of new innovations to solve the problem.

Political will is a critical component to tackling housing challenges in Houston and Harris County. Throughout the housing conversation speakers repeatedly returned to the idea that without policy-makers stepping up to advocate for additional funding and pushing back against limiting “not in my backyard” (NIMBY) attitudes, little would change. This responsibility applies to residents and public stakeholders as well who have to come to the process prepared to find solutions. Political leadership must be found at the local, state and federal levels, but a number of speakers highlighted the importance of local leaders identifying and embracing innovative solutions. Other service areas, such as school districts, that are impacted by housing should also get involved, acknowledge challenges and push for solutions.

Advocates must make it possible for public officials to step up to the issue and then hold the public leaders accountable. Engaging a diverse array of organizations and individuals who support affordable housing both spotlights the importance of the issue for policy-makers while also provides appropriate support for them to engage. The ongoing political effort to address housing is not an easy task and requires on-going education, engagement and trust.

Outlined below are key ideas and strategies drawn from stakeholders in the conversation about how best to encourage political will and leadership around the issue of housing:

1. **Create meaningful opportunities to engage key voices that vocalize needs to policy-makers**, including the faith-based community, residents, corporations, community development corporations, community nonprofits and civic clubs.
 - a. Develop a diverse coalition that can advocate for affordable housing in the region and hold policy-makers accountable.
2. **Connect housing challenges with other critical local issues.** Housing is not a stand-alone issue and many other areas (i.e. schools, health and crime) require

innovative ways to address inter-connected challenges. These opportunities can attract new political champions and resources.

3. **Advocates and residents should build long-term relationships with policy-makers**, so that when crises arise, the connection has been established already.
4. **Encourage inter-governmental entities so that jurisdiction can work more closely with each other (i.e. Houston and Harris County)** to discuss challenges and strategize about solutions.
5. **Encourage Houston to develop a comprehensive housing plan**
 - a. Establishes a clear set of strategies and goals based on data and community input to address housing and determine priorities for all public sector investment
 - b. Particularly noted in the conversation, encourage Houston to take a vested interest in TIRZ funds for affordable housing to ensure it is being used strategically.
6. **Undertake an innovative housing project** that models effective policies, funding sources and community engagement. This can help set the stage for subsequent opportunities.
 - a. Look for sites where Houston or Harris County possess leverage, e.g. identify sites where public land can be used for the project or as an incentive.
7. **Ensure that housing goals are linked to efforts in other departments and jurisdictions.**
 - a. Both Houston and Harris County should hold regular meetings with leaders overseeing housing, economic development, transportation and planning to facilitate collaboration and identify opportunities for incorporating affordable housing policies into other city programs. Document findings publicly.
 - b. Hold regular meetings between Houston, Harris County, and leaders from other municipalities to identify similar overlaps. Document findings publicly.

Interwoven issues

Housing is an integral part of people's lives, but it cannot be viewed in isolation from other important elements. Education, healthcare, transportation, employment and wages, and the history of various communities are all connected with housing. The housing discussion, therefore, can provide a space through which to tie these interwoven topics together in effective, reinforcing ways. Partnerships need to be built and reinforced across public and private entities in order to ensure the creation of cohesive and complete communities that work for all residents. Public officials, advocates, and service providers involved with the housing system must work with colleagues across sectors to tie services together. This effort should respond to the needs voiced by different communities.

Individual housing plans cannot address all the issues that stem from these interwoven issues. Careful efforts, however, that establish clear ties between housing programs and other linked services could be effective launching points for using the housing discussion to address a wide variety of issues.

Outlined below are key ideas and strategies drawn from stakeholders in the conversation about how to best connect interwoven issues with the housing system:

1. **Cultivate partnerships with key institutions operating in interconnected areas.** Public and private housing providers should connect with school districts, healthcare providers, transportation agencies, private businesses, and other entities to identify common resources and areas of need. Housing plan documents should identify areas of common dialogue and action.
 - a. A school district, for example, could offer land it owns for housing projects or work with a housing agency to create programming that aims to educate school families about housing programs.
2. **Support the implementation of family-sustaining wages through major employers and partners.** With higher incomes, housing options become more affordable. Housing issues should be tied into discussions about the growth of the city's economy and workforce. School districts, cities, and major private companies could institute family-sustaining wages within their organizations to help improve the economic situation of many Houston and Harris County households.
 - a. A number of conversation participants noted the importance of pursuing higher wages as a tool for households to improve their housing situation.
3. **View community development as a holistic endeavor.** Public agencies and partners can work to strengthen existing communities using housing as either an anchor or a support. The strengthening of a community does not have to start with housing, and agencies within the housing system can bring additional services into housing projects.
 - a. Major investments into housing must be coupled with investments in other infrastructure and capital improvements.
 - b. Houston is currently developing a Complete Communities initiative that sees housing as one component of a larger effort to strengthen communities.
 - c. Housing and transportation costs and solutions should be considered jointly. The two make up a large share of every household's spending. The Center for Neighborhood Technology uses a housing + transportation mechanism to calculate affordability.
 - d. In the conversation there was clear focus and debate on the importance of education and school district involvement in communities. Ideas that came out to tie education and housing together included ensuring equitable capital investment in all communities and working to make schools in all neighborhoods successful.

- 4. Housing agencies and partners must support the efforts of one another.** For schools to succeed families need stable homes. It is easier for a worker to retain employment if they have stable housing. The same logic applies for housing developments and communities as whole. Leaders in the housing system should support efforts of interconnected systems to strengthen their services and efficacy. In each direction, leadership will need to go beyond their comfort zones to achieve better, more holistic results.

Conclusion

We would like to again thank the participants who joined the conversation, the expert panelists, the steering committee members, and the sponsors who made the Houston and Harris County Housing Conversation a success. Participation included more than 200 persons from a diverse array of constituencies: non-profits, government agencies, financial institutions, developers, community development corporations, service providers, foundations, universities, community leaders and residents. Each participant expressed their knowledge and passion about the issue, while maintaining respect for each other and addressing complex challenges. It is through this mutual engagement that Houston and Harris County will be able to effectively address its housing challenges.

The synthesized themes and ideas outlined in this report provide a set of broadly sourced and passionately held thoughts on what a regional housing solution might look like for Houston and Harris County. This is a document that all stakeholders should be able to refer to for guidance and ideas. With Houston's Complete Communities initiative taking shape, plans for a new comprehensive housing plan in the works, and ongoing planning work occurring at the county and in other municipalities, the information offered here is vital.

The conversation captured a moment of great energy around this issue. Committed public servants, advocates, developers, and residents have already put years of work and effort into improving our housing system. The momentum so evident in the charrette makes it clear that now is a moment where additional effort can build upon that previous work. The conversation creates the opportunity to help move the region toward becoming a place with a diverse range of affordable housing available for all types of people in all parts of the county.

We encourage everyone to find opportunities, both in our communities as well as citywide, to engage around these ideas. We firmly believe the Houston and Harris County community has the opportunity to use this report to continue this important conversation. We hope the ongoing conversation around affordable housing offers an opportunity to stay engaged and to continue expanding the dialogue in order to meaningfully shape the city, county, and region.