



**HARMONY PLACE MOBILE HOME PARK COMMUNITY SURVEY  
COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SUPPLEMENT**

**THE NORTHERN VIRGINIA AFFORDABLE HOUSING ALLIANCE**

## Background

Too often, decisions are made *for* and research is *done on* communities instead of *with* communities. This is especially true for communities, like Harmony Place Mobile Home Park, which suffer from chronic disinvestment. To avoid this pitfall, the Harmony Place Community Survey was conducted using a community-engaged research (CEnR) framework, leveraging residents' lived expertise to develop a more complete and accurate understanding of socio-demographic characteristics, living conditions, concerns and priorities of the community members.

CEnR is a research approach that involves working in partnership with communities to study issues that impact community health and well-being. The CEnR framework recognizes the need for equitable and inclusive research processes that incorporate community members' lived expertise and specialized knowledge by engaging them as decision makers. This approach is consistent with the One Fairfax Policy, as well as the recommendation of the Fairfax County Affordable Housing Preservation Task Force Mobile Homes Work Group to engage mobile home residents through a robust community outreach strategy. This supplement describes how this approach was implemented in the Harmony Place Community Survey, and outlines recommendations for future CEnR studies in the County. To learn about the results from the survey, please see the accompanying "Summary of Findings."

## Methods

The survey was conducted in partnership by the Northern Virginia Affordable Housing Alliance (NVAHA), Tenants and Workers United (TWU) and a group of nine Harmony Place community leaders identified by TWU. NVAHA and TWU staff and the community leaders worked together to design the survey instrument and interpret the results during a series of four Zoom calls spread over six months (the leaders preferred to meet via Zoom rather than in-person).

Prior to the first Zoom call, County staff provided NVAHA with a list of questions to capture basic demographic and income data. These questions roughly correspond to Section I of the survey instrument. During the initial Zoom call on June 17, 2021, the community leaders provided feedback on the County's questions, and discussed additional questions to include in the survey. Following the initial meeting, NVAHA staff developed a draft survey instrument, which the community leaders reviewed during the second Zoom meeting on July 26. NVAHA staff revised the survey instrument after the second meeting based on feedback from the community leaders. Between the first and second meetings, NVAHA and TWU worked collaboratively to develop a consent form and instructions for administering the survey.

TWU staff worked with the community leaders to administer the survey by going door-to-door in the community between August 16 – 23. NVAHA staff analyzed the survey results using Microsoft Excel (Version 16.53) and Tableau (version 2021.1.3). NVAHA and TWU staff presented the results to the community leaders during the third Zoom meeting on September 22. The community leaders helped interpret the survey results, and provided feedback on what information to highlight during an in-person event to share the results of the survey with the community.

NVAHA and TWU collaborated to plan and execute the data sharing event. The event was held on Saturday, October 9 at the mobile home park. The event featured three stations – each highlighting a different set of survey results. Highlighted results were selected based on:

- Feedback from community leaders regarding what results the community would find most interesting and what information (e.g., household size and demographics) the community already knew
- The need for additional clarification/help interpreting discrepancies within the data (see “Summary of Findings”)

Infographics summarizing survey results in English and Spanish were located at each station. Residents were asked to provide written feedback on the results. Residents could choose to respond to a set of questions based on the third meeting with community leaders, or could provide general feedback.

NVAHA recruited a volunteer interpreter who was present throughout the event to answer questions and support residents in recording their feedback. A bilingual County staff person from Neighborhood and Community Services was also present to share information on County resources and help with interpretation. TWU staff and the community leaders provided additional interpretation support.

The event doubled as a celebration to thank and compensate the community for their participation in the survey. TWU staff organized activities for children, and NVAHA contracted with resident-owned businesses to provide food, tables and chairs. The event featured music and a gift card raffle. In addition, NVAHA presented each of the nine community leaders with a \$100 gift card to thank them for their time and expertise.

Feedback obtained during the community event and during the third Zoom meeting with community leaders was incorporated into the “Summary of Findings” submitted to the County. NVAHA staff translated the “Summary of Findings” into Spanish, and printed copies were provided to the community leaders prior to the fourth and final Zoom meeting. During the final Zoom meeting on November 9, the community leaders provided feedback on the “Summary of Findings” and prepared their presentation to County staff (with support from NVAHA and TWU).

## Recommendations

This study was the first survey of a mobile home community in Northern Virginia, and the first survey of a mobile home community in the state to employ a CEnR framework. Below are the best practices that we followed and believe contributed to the success of the project. We hope these findings are instructive for County staff involved in future community engagement initiatives:

- **Partner with a *trusted* community-based organization.** This study could not have been completed without the support and partnership of TWU. TWU has a strong relationship with the Harmony Place community rooted in their history of providing support to and advocating for the community. Their participation lent credibility to NVAHA as a technical advisor assisting with survey design and data analysis, while their institutional knowledge was critical to engaging community leaders, successfully administering the survey and executing the data sharing event.
- **Compensate the community.** Compensating individuals with lived expertise for their participation in policy and planning processes is an established best practice. Compensation is an equity issue because it values community members’ time and expertise in the same way as staff time and expertise. Compensation should be

commensurate with the scope and duration of the study or activity. We compensated the community leaders who helped to design and administer the survey and interpret the results. We also acknowledged the participation of all community members through the community event, and by raffling off five \$50 gift cards during the event.

- **Share research findings.** It is common for researchers to conduct studies in communities like Harmony Place without following-up to share the results. This leaves residents feeling disengaged from the research process, and unable to utilize survey findings to advocate for their community. We prioritized sharing the results of this study with the Harmony Place community because we recognized community feedback was essential to accurately interpret the findings, and because these findings ultimately belong to the community.
- **Communicate openly and often.** In between meetings with the community leaders, NVAHA and TWU shared frequent updates on the progress of the survey, and each meeting with the community leaders concluded by outlining the next steps in the process. Consistent communication, transparency and following through on action steps is essential to building trust and sustaining relationships with communities.
- **Preempt barriers to accessibility.** NVAHA worked closely with TWU to identify and preempt barriers to community access. Meetings were held in the evenings and on weekends to accommodate working residents. The community leaders preferred to meet via Zoom; however many joined by phone. After our second meeting, when we realized not everyone had access to screen sharing on their phones it prompted TWU to distribute printed copies of meeting materials in advance. All materials, including the survey instrument, consent form, administrator's guide, infographics, summary report and this supplement were produced in English and Spanish. Based on community preference, TWU staff and community leaders administered the survey door-to-door using paper copies of the survey instrument. The data sharing event was held in the community and supervised children's activities were provided to eliminate barriers to attendance. Bilingual interpreters were on-hand during the event to answer questions and support any residents facing literacy barriers. These measures of 'meeting residents where they are' contributed to our high response rate (90.48%) and resident engagement during the data sharing event. One limitation, which should be addressed in future outreach by the County, was our inability to provide resources in languages other than English or Spanish (at least four residents in the community speak Thai).
- **Budget for a pilot study.** There were discrepancies in participants' responses to several items on the survey instrument (see "Summary of Findings"). These discrepancies were likely due in part to unclear wording and insufficient guidance for survey administrators. Conducting a small pilot study with a group of 5 – 10 residents could have led to the identification of these issues, enabling us to reword questions and provide more detailed guidance to administrators. Another benefit of conducting a pilot study is to enable more community members to weigh-in on the survey design. We recommend that future CEnR initiatives budget sufficient time and resources to conduct a pilot study. This may require extending the project timeline by 2 – 4 weeks, and will require increasing compensation for the partner organization and community leaders, and compensating pilot study participants.

## Conclusion

We believe that the CEnR approach for this study led to a higher response rate, and produced more accurate and nuanced results. Equally important, the CEnR framework engaged community members as collaborators and decision makers throughout the research process in a manner that is consistent with the County's goals of equity, inclusion and bolstering civic engagement among underserved communities.