

Lessons for Community Participation in the AFFH Process

One of the primary goals of the 2015 Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing (AFFH) Rule is ensuring that there is meaningful public participation in fair housing planning. The rule requires jurisdictions to solicit public feedback, consult agencies and other stakeholders, and make a proposed fair housing analysis publicly available. PRRAC's AFFH work in Contra Costa County, California and in Washington, DC included meeting stakeholders as well as facilitating meetings and hearings designed to both educate the public about the process and help us better understand the fair housing context in each community. In both jurisdictions, PRRAC engaged in an initial round of public meetings to introduce the AFFH process to the community and learn about issues. Once a draft Analysis of Impediments was released, another round of meetings was held. These outreach events strengthened the fair housing analysis and provided the following important lessons for how to improve the public participation process going forward.

Start Early and Consider How to Approach Outreach

It is important to lay the groundwork for public participation as early as possible to maximize public participation and work out considerations such as how to translate materials for Limited English Proficient (LEP) residents. Communication about opportunities for participation should go out as early as possible. If a jurisdiction is part of a regional collaboration or is working with a consultant, it is also important to coordinate which entity will be publicizing events and when. Additionally, social media is a valuable way for many people to learn about engagement opportunities but is not a fully adequate replacement for print media and other approaches to get the word out about events, especially for senior citizens and those without reliable internet access.

Reach out to a Broad Variety of Stakeholders

Outreach to a wide range of stakeholders is vital to get an accurate cross-section of community perspectives. Reaching out to fair housing organizations is a good starting point but outreach should extend to include other groups that typically might not be involved in housing planning. These groups often proved to provide some of the most helpful input. Asking stakeholders about other organizations they think should be involved is a good way to tap into existing networks, gain understanding of how organizations work together on issues, and get a more diverse set of voices involved in the process. Building relationships with these stakeholders is also important as they can help get the word about public participation efforts.

Consider Where and When Events are Held

Meeting people where they are and when would be convenient for them can help increase participation. Jurisdictions should consider whether meeting locations are close to transit, accessible for persons with disabilities, and are a safe space for all people. Local government staff may be easily able to reserve space inside of government buildings but some members of the community might view these spaces as unwelcoming places. Jurisdictions should also consider holding meetings in evening hours so that more people can attend.

Streamline Presentations

Presentations at meetings were most effective when they were relatively simple and focused on key fair housing issues. While it is important to provide background information about what fair housing means and what the AFFH process entails, too much detail about legal obligations and overly technical language about data can cause confusion and detract from the overall purpose of a presentation. In contrast, visual aids, especially maps depicting residential segregation and opportunity indices from HUD's AFFH Data and Mapping Tool, proved to be highly effective. The maps often showed what many participants intuitively knew about their own communities and helped connect the AFFH process to tangible issues in their own lives.

Provide a structure for Discussion

It is important to allow residents the opportunity to voice their opinions on what issues are affecting them. However, without a focused structure, forums could veer into topics unrelated to fair housing issues. Using discussion prompts usually led to more valuable feedback.

Consider Alternate Opportunities for Input

Public meetings and hearings are the most traditional ways of getting feedback but are not always successful at getting genuine and broad community participation. These types of settings can be intimidating for people who do not feel comfortable with public speaking, may not fit into individual schedules, and can suffer from low attendance. Jurisdictions should consider alternatives such as open houses, workshops, and virtual meetings to encourage participation.