

Genuine Engagement with Housing Choice Voucher Families

— Darryn Mumphery

Families with Housing Choice Vouchers can be more than clients for housing mobility programs – they can also be valuable advisors, advocates, and partners. For the past few years, Mobility Works partner organizations have built strong client engagement programs which should be incorporated more broadly as housing mobility programs expand across the country.

It is not easy to organize voucher families. Since voucher holders live spread across a community rather than together in one building or immediate area, the biggest challenge is bringing them together for collaborative advocacy, training, or participation in program development. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has made the task more complicated by limiting face-to-face contact – though virtual tools like Zoom have helped.

This policy brief will highlight client engagement and leadership efforts in Baltimore, Chicago and Dallas as potential models for programs in other cities.



Baltimore Regional Housing Partnership's Client Advisory Board

The Baltimore Regional Housing Partnership's Client Advisory Board provides a space for BHRP clients to collaborate, organize, and give input on program services. Most importantly, it creates an opportunity for clients to grow as community advocates.

The team at BRHP began building the Client Advisory Board by first assessing client interest. They used their client newsletter to circulate a survey which asked clients to evaluate their experience in the housing mobility program and indicate topics of interest. BRHP then used survey results paired with internal data on employment status, household size, age, and other variables to hone in on a diverse group of clients for participation in an initial discussion. This group discussion helped the BRHP team identify the most engaged clients and recruit members to serve on the Client Advisory Board.

Client Advisory Board members attend quarterly meetings. Participants are given a \$30 stipend after each meeting they attend, out of respect for their time (though they were not aware of this incentive before committing to joining the Board). Renita Dorsey, a Program Training Specialist at

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BRHP, notes the passion that members of the Client Advisory Board bring: “Our participants enjoy sharing their experiences and speaking openly and honestly about what works and what needs improvement within our organization,” says Dorsey. “The participants we selected are



really self-motivated, and I believe that’s the main reason the Client Advisory Board has been successful so far.”

BRHP staff members and clients alike feel the Board has contributed to an enhanced sense of community. Renita Dorsey described how BRHP staff are “listening to their [clients] concerns and actively trying to incorporate some of their suggestions in our daily practices and in how we administer our program.” BRHP clients feel this dynamic as well, and it serves to bolster their confidence in themselves as communicators and advocates. According to Dondra Davenport,

a Client Advisory Board member, the board gave voucher holders “a voice to speak up for not only ourselves, but also for other voucher recipients that might be experiencing similar problems.” “Once I was chosen to be on the board, I wanted to know how we the members could make life better for someone else coming into BRHP. We the members were chosen for the task of helping our community build a future.”

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For voucher holders involved with the Client Advisory Board, having a place to share their thoughts and opinions has also empowered them to engage in advocacy and activism in their communities, no matter the cause. From its inception, BRHP has also had clients represented on the Board of Directors, and the Client Advisory Board may serve as a pipeline for Board of Directors participation in the future.



Inclusive Communities Project’s “Voices for Opportunity” and “Voices of Vision”

Inclusive Communities Project’s (ICP) “Voices for Opportunity” advocacy training serves to give voucher holders the skills they need to take part in public discussions regarding fair and affordable housing issues in Dallas. “Voices for Opportunity” is a series of regularly-held workshops developed by Demetria McCain, the recent past President of ICP. Residents involved in these workshops are trained in the advocacy skills necessary for them to represent themselves and their interests in the media and in the community. These residents have used traditional media, social media, city council hearings, and Affirmatively Furthering Fair Housing meetings to speak out about the issues impacting them. Their messages have targeted both city and state officials. Most recently, ICP clients can be seen in an anti-discrimination video detailing the struggles voucher holders encounter when seeking housing placements in “high opportunity areas.”

Dallas, Texas

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ICP's efforts with "Voices for Opportunity" were informed, in part, by a program titled "Voices of Vision." "Voices of Vision" is a series of monthly round table discussions involving housing mobility counselors and voucher families who have made the decision to move to well-resourced, low poverty areas of the Dallas Metroplex. These meetings began as in-person, geographically-specific round tables, at one point incorporating Healing Circles, as informed by Kellogg's Truth Racial Healing and Transformation project in Dallas. The roundtables later grew into virtual, yet still geographically-specific conference calls to accommodate ICP's regionally dispersed families and the restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Shamira Lawrence, Mobility Assistance Program Director at ICP says clients were enthusiastic about the program from the very beginning. She maintains the "Voices of Vision" round tables "give the clients an opportunity to voice their concerns and their excitement, but also an opportunity to network with each other." Through this communicative channel, clients have the ability to connect, establish relationships, and support one another. Clients are also able to use the meetings as an outlet where they could express problems and concerns without fear of reproach.

Housing Choice Partners' engagement with the Illinois Coalition for Fair Housing

Housing Choice Partners (HCP) engages voucher holders in advocacy opportunities on a number of levels, most prominently through the Illinois Coalition for Fair Housing. The Coalition is made up of several organizations focused on furthering fair housing for homeowners, those experiencing homelessness, and renters – including voucher tenants, who seem to face disproportionate amounts of discrimination. At present, the Coalition is channeling advocacy efforts towards ending source of income discrimination in Illinois. Source of income discrimination is an issue that effects voucher holders deeply, as landlords can be hostile or exploitive when they discover a resident will be utilizing voucher assistance to cover their rent.



The Coalition is "structured in a manner that gives weighted influence to those directly impacted by the issue," according to Michael Chavarria, Community Engagement Manager at HCP. "The organizations are the proxy to the democratic process we have, but in the case of HCP, we essentially defer our voting to impacted leaders that we partner with," says Chavarria. This approach centers the voices of residents who experience the discrimination on a daily basis and allows voucher holders the space to be self-advocates and to learn first-hand how to push for change on an issue that tangibly impacts their everyday life.

HCP also engaged in know-your-rights trainings around the Chicagoland area prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. HCP used these trainings to identify voucher holders who were curious about their rights and interested in engaging in self-advocacy. The trainings helped cultivate the knowledge

Chicagoland Area, Illinois

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base of the voucher program participants while exposing them to a broader network and providing support for their advocacy efforts.

HCP is also in the process of developing an advisory council for clients, similar to the client advisory board in Baltimore. The advisory board will be comprised of voucher holders in the Chicago area who have previously worked with HCP's housing counselors. These residents will provide feedback on HCP's program offerings to ensure HCP is addressing needs of the people they serve.

Conclusion

The client engagement programs implemented in Baltimore, Dallas and Chicago are models of what the effective organizing of voucher holders can look like – even during a global pandemic. Based on our programs' experience, some considerations other programs may want to follow include:

- ◆ Determine who is interested. Take the time to speak with your program participants and delve into the issues that mean the most to them. Ask them about their problems, but also if and how they want to be involved in creating solutions.
- ◆ Hold preliminary screening discussions to identify participants who will be self-motivated and fully engaged in communicating with other residents, community leaders, and government officials when necessary.
- ◆ If the resources are available, incentivize engaged participants to continue their involvement by compensating their time and effort. Implement stipends for transportation, technology, or participation.
- ◆ It is okay to begin with a small group of participants. A small but committed group of participants can be just as powerful as a large group.
- ◆ It may be beneficial to begin with a concrete goal in mind for the initiative. For example, is the goal is to connect voucher holders within a community to one another? Is the goal to push for specific changes in legislation? Is the goal to help voucher holders develop a certain skillset? Work with participants to define the initial goals of the group.
- ◆ Informing voucher holders of their rights and training them to use their platform in a productive way is essential. Hold workshops, mock interviews, discussions, and debates to help them become more comfortable and practiced communicators.
- ◆ Meetings and training should be accessible. When deciding which platforms to use for organizing, be mindful of technology and cost. Consider holding in-person meetings in communities where voucher families have moved.
- ◆ Voucher holders should be empowered to lead in these spaces. Encourage participants to take on leadership roles and make room for them to do so.

About the Author

Darryn Mumphery is a Law & Policy Fellow at PRRAC and a 2020 graduate of Georgetown University Law Center.