Resident Voice and Agency in Affordable Rental Housing:

A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

December 2020

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Quality, affordable housing is a foundational social determinant of health and has direct links to individual and family health. These links are further enhanced through resident services coordination and services provided onsite, such as health promotion education and health screenings; fitness and recreation activities; food pantries and access to fresh fruits and vegetables through community gardens; transportation; after-school enrichment and youth development programs; social events; and financial capability programs. However, to realize the full benefits of housing as a platform to create healthier and more equitable communities, housing and services must be connected in a way that recognizes and supports the agency of residents and gives them a real voice in how day-to-day life is carried out in their community. **Even in properties operated by actors with a deep commitment to equity and well-being for their residents, for a host of reasons the lived experience for residents of affordable housing may not give residents the choices and sense of control that support equitable communities and individual well-being.**

Stewards of Affordable Housing for the Future (SAHF) is a national collaborative of nonprofits who share a vision of a world where every person has a healthy home in a flourishing community. Launched in 2003, SAHF's mission-driven alliance combines the sophistication and expertise of thirteen of the largest and highest-performing nonprofit affordable housing providers to accelerate policy changes, innovation and on-the-ground solutions for creating and preserving affordable, quality, environmentally sustainable homes in healthy, equitable communities. SAHF members own more than 147,500 affordable rental homes for families and seniors, and they share a commitment to providing quality homes that are enhanced by resident services. With almost 60% of all properties in the SAHF portfolio providing some

form of onsite service coordination, SAHF members are primed as leaders in the field to promote a systems approach to service-enriched housing, which is also resident-centered.

In 2016, SAHF formed a Community of Practice (CoP) to support a System of Enhanced Resident Services Coordination. Following extensive engagement of SAHF members, other stakeholders in housing, and partners in health, social services, and education, SAHF created the Framework for the System of Resident Services Coordination (Framework) in 2018. The Framework outlines key components that organizations need to include in implementing resident services in a systematic way.[1] It provides specific guidance on the organizational capacities and programmatic elements that are needed to implement an effective, sustainable, and scalable resident services program, and forms the foundation of the Certified Organization for Resident Engagement & Services (CORES) Certification managed by SAHF.

Along with the creation of the Framework, SAHF has hosted several roundtables exploring the physical and mental health impacts of chronic, toxic stress and trauma on residents and frontline staff, and conducted a literature review of the protective factors an individual's perceived control and sense of agency plays in his or her well-being. As SAHF continued conversations about agency with its members and considered next steps, it was apparent that applying a resident-centered approach to only resident services is insufficient. The breakdown of resident-centered values and intentions often occur in the daily business of operating properties, which are hindered by regulatory concerns.

As a result, and with support from the Kresge Foundation, SAHF engaged with its members and the larger field to identify operational strategies that foster resident agency, with the intent to update the Framework and to support wider practitioner adoption at both organizational and property levels. As a part of this effort, SAHF launched a project to engage directly with residents, frontline staff, and senior-level resident services staff to identify and better understand strategies for engaging collaboratively with residents and fostering greater resident agency and voice. The findings described in this report are the result of qualitative research conducted over ten months with the residents and staff of three different SAHF member properties located in Massachusetts, Ohio, and California.

THE GOALS OF THIS RESEARCH WERE TO:

- Highlight best practices for including residents in the design and implementation of services.

- Explore different ways of including residents in property governance and operations.

- Identify themes and strategies to better operationalize a "resident-centered approach" into the Framework and across the organization.

- Identify field-level learning to be shared with peer organizations.

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1   More detailed information can be found on the SAHF website (https://sahfnet.org/our-work/housing-as-a-platform/housing-platform-success)

METHODOLOGY

Prior to starting this work, SAHF conducted an analysis of potential properties for qualitative research within its members' portfolios and identified three properties using the following criteria:

- Properties serving both families and seniors
- Existing resident services coordination and related activities
- Diverse geographic locations
- Resident diversity in race and ethnicity at the properties
- Variance in subsidy type
- Multiple owners represented

SAHF chose these criteria to ensure the most diverse geographic and demographic representation despite the relatively small sample size. Changes in staffing, the project budget, and a limited timeframe are the largest factors that limited the project participation to three members/properties. While rich in data, well-done qualitative studies are very labor intensive and time-consuming. To provide additional support to staff, SAHF contracted with Success Measures at NeighborWorks America and Verge Impact Partners to assist with development of the focus group protocol and staff interview guides. Success Measures staff also facilitated all the focus groups at each property site and authored a report detailing the focus group results, which is available upon request. A summary of the themes from the Success Measures report can be found in the Appendix of this report.

A total of six focus groups, two at each SAHF member property selected for participation, were conducted in fall of 2019—engaging with 58 residents total. SAHF staff also interviewed at least two frontline staff members from

each property (typically the resident services coordinator and the property manager), as well as senior staff in charge of resident services at the corporate level. Each interview was conducted by two members of SAHF's Resident Outcomes team, with one team member facilitating the interview and the other in charge of the audio recording and notetaking. Consent to record the interview was verbally obtained by each interview subject prior to recording and was done to accurately capture subjects' perspectives and complete any gaps within the notes. All interviews occurred via telephone between January and April 2020 and took anywhere from 30 to 90 minutes depending on the length of the respondent's answer to each question.

Both the focus groups and interviews centered on three areas for inquiry:

- Perceptions of resident agency supported at both the property and organizational levels
- Data and information sharing
- Trauma-informed approaches

> *Food insecurity, community violence, and other socioeconomic difficulties are stressors that increase the risk of poor health outcomes among low-income individuals.[2] Trauma-informed approaches can mitigate the effects of stress, create better opportunities to address the social determinants of health, and increase personal agency to improve health and economic outcomes.*

Additionally, the interview protocol also included questions about perceived benefits and challenges of facilitating resident power and decision-making and how these

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2   Food Research & Action Center. (2017, December). Hunger and health – The impact of poverty, food insecurity, and poor nutrition on health and well-being. [White paper]. https://frac.org/wp-content/uploads/hunger-health-impact-poverty-food-insecurity-health-well-being.pdf

influenced community engagement and program design.

As expected, there was both congruence and divergence across resident and staff perspectives regarding resident agency and the levels of autonomy, both for residents and frontline staff, to exercise and support agency, respectively. Findings fall into three topical areas:

- The interpersonal interactions and day-to-day processes that shape levels of resident agency;
- Immediate and long-term implications for property operations, and;
- Ways in which both residents and staff address individual and community-level trauma.

These findings offer several key insights that have implications for SAHF's Residents Outcomes Initiative, for the affordable housing and resident services fields, and for possible future research.

AGENCY, HEALTH, AND WELL-BEING IN SERVICE-ENRICHED HOUSING

Over the past several decades, affordable housing owners offering resident services at their properties have explored ways to include residents in decision-making at the property in varying degrees. Methods of resident engagement fall along a spectrum of shared power in decision-making[3] from informing to empowering. For resident services practitioners, resident engagement and involvement are most often facilitated through surveys on resident needs and interests to design programs. In this context, resident engagement relates to participation and is quantified by program

attendance and participation. Some owners have developed models of deeper engagement in collaboration with residents. These models sometimes include:

- working with and supporting tenant associations, resident councils, or other resident leaders to participate more actively in community building efforts, property operations, and resident services offered;
- providing services through a trauma-informed and asset-based lens;
- emphasizing equity in access and service delivery;

and developing approaches that acknowledge residents' life experiences and cultures.

The wide spectrum of engagement strategies has meant that many properties and approaches to engagement succeed at informing residents and including feedback on types of programs that residents are interested in, but may not build trust, demonstrate collaboration, or affirmatively further health and well-being.

Furthermore, residents face chronic and toxic stress when experiencing food insecurity, community violence, or a myriad of other socioeconomic difficulties. Trauma-informed approaches can mitigate the effects of stress, create better opportunities to address the social determinants of health, and increase personal agency to improve health and economic outcomes. Environments where personal agency is encouraged and exercised and that apply trauma-informed practices can address health equity at scale.

For this project, agency refers to autonomy, or perceived control over one's own life. Agency can be an accelerator for a broad range of life outcomes.[4] The U.S. Partnership on Mobility from Poverty has found that, in addition to

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3   https://sustainingcommunity.wordpress.com/2017/02/14/spectrum-of-public-participation/

4   Infurna, F. J., Gerstorf, D., Ram, N., Schupp, J., & Wagner, G. G. (2011). Long-term antecedents and outcomes of perceived control. Psychology and Aging, 26(3), 559-575. doi:10.1037/a0022890

economic success, feelings of power and autonomy and being valued in a community are two core tenets of economic mobility.[5] A growing evidence base demonstrates that perceived control also plays a role in mitigating trauma and toxic stress, especially as it relates to control of the present and future.[6] For seniors, declining physical health can also decrease participation in social activities, whether or not the activity requires mobility. However, increased agency can mitigate this effect, thereby increasing social activity and reducing social isolation.[7] Giving residents the space to exercise autonomy within the environment they call home is an important facet to implementing resident-centered service coordination and operations and to supporting resident health and well-being.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT MODEL

As part of this project, SAHF looked at community engagement models commonly used in other, related fields. The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership, developed by the Movement Strategy Center, and the International Association of Public Participation (IAPP)'s Levels of Community Engagement model (Figure 1) are two examples of how affordable housing providers can shift resident engagement from simply informing (e.g. participation in resident services programs and post-event feedback) to empowering, which involves the notion of power sharing. However, in an affordable housing setting,

LEVEL OF PUBLIC IMPACT

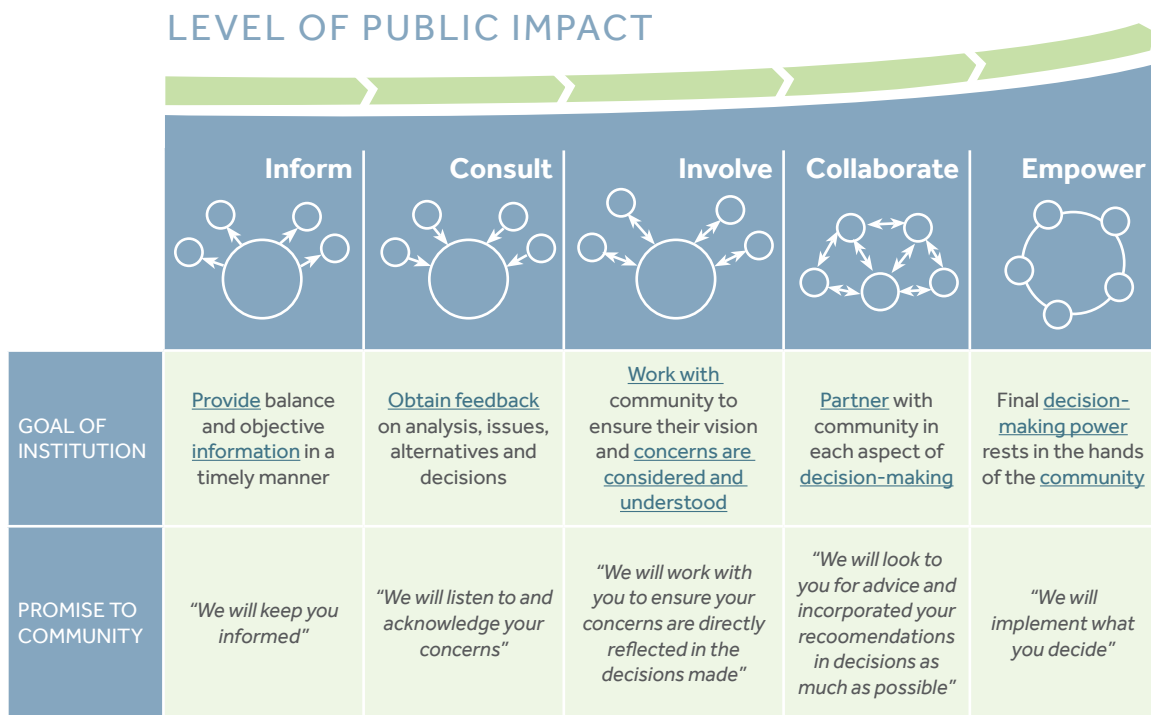|	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
GOAL OF INSTITUTION	Provide balance and objective information in a timely manner	Obtain feedback on analysis, issues, alternatives and decisions	Work with community to ensure their vision and concerns are considered and understood	Partner with community in each aspect of decision-making	Final decision-making power rests in the hands of the community
PROMISE TO COMMUNITY	*"We will keep you informed"*	*"We will listen to and acknowledge your concerns"*	*"We will work with you to ensure your concerns are directly reflected in the decisions made"*	*"We will look to you for advice and incorporated your recoomendations in decisions as much as possible"*	*"We will implement what you decide"*

Figure 1: IAPP's Levels of Community Engagement Model

5 Acs, Maitrey, Conner, Markus, Patel, Lyons-Padilla, & Eberhart. (2018). Measuring Mobility from Poverty. Retrieved from mobilitypartnership.org
6 Frazier, Keenan, Anders, Perera, Challcross, & Hintz. (2011). Perceived past, present, and future control and adjustment to stressful life events. Journal of Personality & Social Psychology, 100(4), 749-765. doi:10.1037/a0022405
7 Curtis, Windsor, & Luszcz. (2017). Perceived Control Moderates the Effects of Functional Limitation on Older Adults' Social Activity: Findings from the Australian Longitudinal study of aging. J Gerontol B Psychol Soc Sci, 72(4), 571-581.

the level of engagement will likely vary from decision to decision. Whether due to reporting requirements, risk management and liability, asset management concerns, budget management, or distrust between owners and residents - an inherent imbalance of power between owners and residents is often present in affordable housing. The key is to find ways to shift power to residents when possible and appropriate, and clearly articulate barriers to and opportunities for further shifts.

KEY FINDINGS

Interpersonal Interactions and Processes that Shape Resident Agency in the Affordable Housing Setting

Residents often used the tenure of a Resident Services Coordinator (RSC) as their time reference for when things occurred, indicating the role of the RSC as a key contributor to their sense of the community, experience of the property, and experience of property management. A property culture and environment that facilitate connection and social cohesion are important to resident satisfaction. All staff who interact with residents can play a major role in how residents' experience the social environment of the property. However, both residents and resident services staff emphasized the need for all staff who interact with residents to be "relationship-oriented." In fact, residents and staff shared examples of when maintenance staff have developed a rapport with residents, engendering trust and enabling these staff members to serve as additional support to both property managers and RSCs in addressing underlying resident needs more quickly. Additionally, both groups also expressed the challenges that occur or difficulty in having residents' needs met when residents do not view all staff as trustworthy or helpful. This can result in residents delaying the reporting of such things as maintenance

requests or a safety concern, or being less likely to engage with other members of the property management team to help support programming or community building and outreach efforts.

House rules regarding access to and the use of common spaces, and how these rules are communicated to residents, are particularly influential in how residents perceive the social environment and their place in it. While many of these restrictions stem from liability concerns for the property, many residents found such restrictions—especially when little to no explanation for their existence or enforcement is provided—to be frustrating at best and infantilizing at worst. For example, one property recently renovated their kitchens and installed a new oven, however residents reported not being allowed to use it. Residents in another focus group mentioned that they are questioned

Photo courtesy of Community Housing Partners.

if they are eating in the common area when an event is not scheduled. Examples like this existed across all focus groups, and residents felt that such rules actively discourage residents from congregating.

When it comes to providing personal information, whether through intake processes or as part of a property survey, residents seek to understand why their information is being collected and how it will be used. Overall, most focus group participants indicate that there is very little data that they are uncomfortable sharing with property staff; however, they desire a clear explanation of why information is being collected and how it will be used. Paradoxically, staff felt that most residents already understood why their data was being collected and, as a result, did not provide many examples of communicating to residents the purpose of various data collections methods utilized.

Staff expressed reticence about sharing aggregated data with residents or didn't understand why they were being asked to do so. In contrast, residents offered several examples of times when having access to certain pieces of data about their neighbors would be beneficial. Several of these examples included self-determined or crowdsourced activities to help fellow neighbors, such as the creation of a phone tree of residents with vehicles who would be willing to carpool or transport other residents. In another focus group, residents suggested that surveying elderly residents or those with limited accessibility would be useful in the winter so that other residents who were willing shovel snow after a snowfall could offer help if they knew which neighbors needed assistance. In another focus group, residents thought it would be beneficial to see aggregated data from resident satisfaction surveys.

Implications for Management and Operations

SAHF members are at different places when it comes to operationalizing the value of resident voice and agency. Some members are actively taking steps to place residents at the center of their business model, such as incorporating models like IAPP's Levels of Community Engagement model (Figure 1) when reviewing decision-making processes or, in the current era of limited in-person gatherings, making the recording of online community meetings accessible to all residents through an electronic newsletter. Regardless of how an affordable housing provider assesses their level of engagement on the IAPP scale, providers stand to gain valuable insight into how decision-making at both the enterprise and property level can evolve to incorporate residents more. However, this requires a significant shift in business culture at all levels. When asked "what do you think would change at your organization if residents were more involved in decision making at the property?" frontline and senior staff responses were wide-ranging. Answers varied from "depends on how it happens" to "higher participation [in resident programs]" to "I don't think it would be beneficial…[residents] would never come to agreement" to "[greater] community building…when people feel connected to others — it changes everything."

Resident voice and agency is often viewed as the primary responsibility of resident services. However, infusing a philosophy that values and facilitates resident voice in decision making, when feasible, requires staff from all levels and departments to make this philosophy viable and operational.

Photo courtesy of BRIDGE Housing.

be the sole responsibility of resident services staff. It requires staff from all levels and departments to make this philosophy viable and operational.

Additionally, senior staff also shared that implementation tools and trainings will be important in the effort to clarify that resident "engagement" is more than participation in services or activities offered at the property. Most frontline staff defined engagement by program and event attendance, with only one respondent specifically mentioning engagement as key to building relationships and trust. When asked about the biggest barriers to implementing changes that are responsive to resident needs, frontline staff's answers ranged from "[residents'] conflicting schedules" to residents' resistance to change or willingness to "try something new" to "limited [resident services] budget." These responses reflect both perceived and actual constraints of implementing changes that are more resident-focused, and demonstrate the importance of leadership that is committed to cultivating a culture shift or even organizational change to foster resident voice and agency.

When residents were asked a similar question, many offered property improvements or community activities that they would recommend. Examples include requesting physical changes to the property to improve accessibility, reinstating outdoor features like community grills, restriping of the parking lot to improve safety, or the creation of a resident welcoming committee and offsite activities for residents (e.g. trips to the zoo, etc.). One respondent acknowledged that just being more involved in decision-making would be "like a team thing and [would facilitate] working together [more]."

Across the affordable housing field, barriers to operationalizing practices that capture the value of resident voice and agency include siloed thinking and operations, limited staff capacity for deepening resident engagement and agency, and a lack of practical tools to guide staff. Depending on corporate structure, resident voice and agency is often viewed as the primary responsibility of resident services. However, infusing a philosophy that values and facilitates resident voice in decision making when feasible cannot

Several staff also acknowledged that affordable housing properties cannot always provide residents with autonomy or a genuine opportunity to contribute to a property's culture or governance in a way that would contribute to a feeling of ownership. Some staff note that, given regulatory requirements, this distinction may be even stronger in affordable housing communities than in apartment communities or cooperatives that are not subsidized. Barriers to operational changes that could foster a sense of ownership include legal and financial risk mitigation in the operation of properties and requirements of subsidy programs.

However, findings from frontline staff interviews suggest that staff motivations and intent may align better with resident-centered policies

and procedures than current practice. **Many staff shared the view that the relationships they build with residents ground their work in meaning, are vital to building trust and inclusion, and can provide vital information on residents' perspectives.** As affordable housing providers grapple with creating more meaningful opportunities to share power and decision-making with residents, it will be important to articulate to staff at all levels that that power sharing can be an important tool to build trust, inclusion, and resident satisfaction. In turn, these values could facilitate a more positive and meaningful living and working environment, for both residents and staff, thus improving resident-landlord relations.

Staff did not report sharing either property-level or community-level data with residents, with the exception of one interviewee reporting using neighborhood crime data with residents to facilitate community/ neighborhood solutions. Many staff members also expressed concern about resident privacy when asked about potentially sharing aggregated and de-identified data. For some, it appeared to be a lack of knowledge or anxiety over what types of data could be shared. As previously mentioned, staff's hesitancy to think about the types of property-level data that *could be shared* may inadvertently hinder relatively easy ways to facilitate resident power or a wider variety of ideas to build community and problem solve.

Addressing Individual and Community-level Trauma

In response to questions about experiencing trauma or stressful situations, residents offered not only stories of stress but also examples of resourcefulness and leaning on their social networks to help them weather challenging times. When focus group participants identified issues that were causing them stress, they also discussed ways that they managed that stress or worked to mitigate the problem. Many also provided examples of when they turned to neighbors for help, collaborated on solutions to address concerns at the property, or worked with outside partners to solve community problems.

Similar to their capacity in operationalizing the value of resident voice and agency, SAHF members are also along a continuum when it comes to utilizing trauma-informed approaches with residents and staff. While some affordable housing owners and resident services practitioners are leading the field and have already begun to incorporate trauma-informed strategies into their operations, it is a paradigm shift for many. One interviewee shared that the concept of trauma-informed approaches "is so new for us, we aren't even using the words to describe the work [this way]". Trauma-informed frameworks and approaches are rooted in the behavioral health sector but can be adapted to any sectors and settings where people receive services and supports to cope with traumatic experiences, including service-enriched housing. Trauma-informed approaches acknowledge that traumatic events experienced by individuals and communities are prevalent and not only a barrier to good health and well-being, but are also burdensome for the institutions and systems serving these communities.[8]

Furthermore, "empowerment, voice and choice" is one of six key principles fundamental to a trauma-informed approach.[9] This principle translates to an environment that recognizes and builds upon the strengths and experiences of both staff and clients [residents] and where operations and any services provided fosters empowerment among *everyone*.

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8   Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. SAMHSA's Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach. HHS Publication No. (SMA) 14-4884. Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014.
9   Ibid

Providing trauma-informed care trainings to staff and incorporating trauma-informed approaches in their operations is a fundamental shift in how property owners can invest in their own workforce, as well as serve the people who live in their properties. This type of investment takes time and resources. However, **staff who have received training in trauma-informed approaches appear better able to support and rely on their peers when they must mediate a potentially negative situation with a resident or among residents.** Staff who were trained demonstrated utilization of these practices during their interviews—oftentimes without explicitly stating that they intentionally applied these practices. They often responded to hypothetical questions about mediating conflict with a trauma-informed lens. Lastly, staff members who had training were more open to and more likely to identify further areas in which they would like to receive more training in the future.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

Interpersonal Interactions and Processes that Shape Resident Agency in the Affordable Housing Setting

Clear and transparent communication with residents is critical when relaying tough or unpopular decisions or changes in rules and to mitigating some of the unequal power dynamics that are common within the tenant-owner relationship. Whether in regard to collecting personal information and data or design changes that occurred during a rehab, residents repeatedly expressed a desire to understand the process of decision-making at the property-level and the rationale for such decisions. While some decisions made at properties are dictated by government

regulations and therefore offer limited or no opportunity for meaningful resident input, the simple act of providing an explanation and providing opportunities for residents to ask questions is something many residents seek. Making time to receive feedback or personally communicate with residents in ways that go beyond simply posting a notice would convey to residents that they are valued members of the community.

Facilitate opportunities for residents to gather to discuss and/or organize resident-led or selected topics of interest. Across all three property sites, several focus group participants expressed to the research team and their RSC that they enjoyed the experience of participating in a focus group and inquired when it would happen again. While it is unclear what about the focus group experience was most appreciated, this feedback does suggest that finding ways to bring people together, without obligation, to discuss issues of import for them could be an important component of an ongoing strategy to build community among residents at a property. It could also serve to better understand which issues residents are most concerned about, providing additional context to what is being collected through more formal data collection methods like resident surveys.

Some SAHF members, like Mercy Housing, do routinely provide residents with connection-building group gatherings guided by resident leadership, which focus on resident-driven interests and concerns. Based on the Trusted Space Partners' model,[10] this style of engagement marks a deliberate effort by Mercy Housing and others in the field to move away from the top-down "town hall" style of resident meetings traditionally led by staff. While this approach is not a format routinely used among property managers and owners, there is value in offering a tenant-centered discussion broadly,

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10 Trusted Space Partners. (2018, July 10). New TSP Article in Shelterforce. [Blog post]. Retrieved from http://www.trustedspacepartners.com/blog/new-tsp-article-in-shelterforce

particularly when there is no standing tenant group. This expanded use of group discussion could counter-balance the negative perception when such meetings are only used during significant property disruptions.

Create leadership roles and pathways for residents that are meaningful and engage residents in ways that are aligned with the "involve" and "collaborate" levels of public impact within the IAPP's Levels of Community Engagement (Figure 1) or a similar scale. Roles and responsibilities that do not recognize residents' strengths and experiences or come across as inauthentic or "token" are likely to erode trust, further damaging the tenant-landlord relationship. Additionally, formal structures, like a resident council, may not always be the best path for authentic leadership, particularly if the council does not possess real power or imposes a hierarchical structure that imposes a power imbalance among residents. Multiple residents in one property described the perception that only certain residents were approached or encouraged to sit on the council, further enforcing existing social divisions at the property. Creating opportunities for ongoing engagement and collaboration that are accessible to more than a few residents or leaders helps to build a different culture of trust and decision-making.

Implications for Management and Operations

Explore ways that residents can be included in the development of property rules, regulations, design, and decision-making. Many residents expressed a lack of control over their personal interactions on the property. So often, owners invest significant time and resources into creating amenities and community spaces for residents, but then significantly limit resident access to them citing management

ABOUT TRUSTED SPACE PARTNERS:

Trusted Space Partners is consulting firm that promotes a 90-minute format for community meetings that "unfolds the same way each time without exceptions, with three ritualized activities designed explicitly around building and strengthening personal relationships:

1. sharing something new and good in their lives

2. relevant small group conversations [called 'table talks'] hosted by participants on topics suggested on the spot, and

3. neighbor-to-neighbor exchanges of favors."

and liability concerns. This disconnect leaves residents feeling excluded and communicates that these amenities are not truly part of their home. Residents and property staff (with support from leadership) can work together to explore how certain decisions and processes lend themselves to co-creation, and if there are ways to include residents in some of the decisions for how access to common areas is provided for residents.

There is a rich body of evidence that validates the role personal agency and sense of control plays in promoting well-being. In the literature, perceived control or sense of control refers to a person's subjective expectations regarding their ability to exert influence over their life circumstances and the outcomes within the surrounding environment.[11] Offering residents genuine opportunities to contribute and to troubleshoot issues at the property alongside staff may help mitigate the negative impacts of trauma and toxic stress experienced

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11 Turiano, N. A., Chapman, B. P., Agrigoroaei, S., Infurna, F. J., & Lachman, M. (2014). Perceived control reduces mortality risk at low, not high, education levels. Health Psychology, 33(8), 883–890. https://doi.org/10.1037/hea0000022

Shared decision-making, increased information/data sharing with residents, and integration of trauma-informed practices are three strategies that can be used to better incorporate resident experience and perspective into property operations, foster greater collaboration with residents, and support increased sense of agency and autonomy amongst residents.

by residents. Using a tool like the IAPP's Levels of Community Engagement scale to map how residents are currently included in key phases of the development process or in operational processes (like lease up, inspections, changes to house rules, use of common space, etc.) could be tremendously beneficial. Undergoing such an exercise both internally and with residents could be a first step at understanding when and how to better incorporate of resident voice and agency.

Identify regulations that inhibit agency and determine which regulations, if any, could be modified through advocacy and engagement with federal and state housing policy and regulatory agencies. Additionally, owners should consider whether regulatory compliance requirements applicable to the residents and the property pose barriers to engaging with and shifting power to residents and community. Requirements and procedures around physical inspections, resident income certification, and file maintenance may offer opportunities to better incorporate resident voice and foster agency. Owners should consider whether additional flexibilities in these requirements would facilitate shifting of power to residents or the community and collaborate with residents to advocate before federal or state housing agencies for changes.

Addressing Individual and Community-level Trauma

Offer trainings on trauma-informed approaches for <u>all</u> property staff. As of this writing, trauma-informed trainings are not a standard core competency for service coordinators and other frontline staff. Through this research, SAHF found that staff trained in trauma-informed approaches reported feeling better equipped to support both residents and their peers when navigating or mediating a potentially confrontational or difficult situation at the property. Such staff also reported being less likely to personalize negative interactions with residents and vocalized being better able to express empathy for residents who may be going through a hardship but are unable to express their grief, anger, or frustration in an appropriate way. Of the interviewees, most of the staff who reported having received trauma-informed training were in resident services. However, some of the property managers interviewed indicated that they received training in trauma-informed practices, utilize these practices, and have seen a positive impact on their interactions with residents. Providing this type of training to all staff members on the frontline could further propagate the notion that resident success is more than just keeping residents stably housed, and it is within the purview of all staff, not just those in resident services. Trauma-informed trainings could also serve as a tool to facilitate improved conflict resolution, trust, and collaboration between residents, resident services staff, and property management. Given the well-documented challenge of recruiting and retaining frontline staff, trauma-informed practices could serve as a professional development and staff retention tool.

Look to racial and social equity movements to incorporate a community organizing approach to resident services and to promote resident agency. Despite stable housing provided by SAHF members, residents continue to live within the context of social and racial discrimination, which have lasting adverse effects on an individual's mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being. Residents in some of the focus groups shared how they have navigated experiences with racism and ageism specifically. Moving to a more asset-based model that provides residents with the tools to amplify their voices as leaders when it comes to developing solutions to both property and larger community issues is a much more sustainable, equitable, and respectful way to engage residents. Several organizations are leading the field, re-structuring their models for community engagement and development, providing anti-racism trainings for their boards and staff, and prioritizing lived experience to help shape the co-development of solutions that impact a community. Residents are compensated for the expertise they bring to decision-making processes and organizations are investing in training opportunities for residents who want to take on additional leadership roles in their community.

LIMITATIONS AND CONSIDERATIONS

1. The number of focus groups and frontline staff interviews was limited to only three properties. While SAHF did its best in attempting to capture a variety of demographic populations and geographies within the portfolio, it is likely that not all of the findings/conclusions will resonate with all SAHF members or SAHF properties.

2. Focus group participant recruitment was conducted by the RSC at each property. While SAHF provided promotional materials to post and recruitment guidelines to RSC, it is unknown how broadly the focus groups were "marketed". In follow-up discussions, some RSCs mentioned that they did targeted outreach to individuals they knew would speak freely or who frequently participated in resident programs. Therefore, it is possible that the opinions of less engaged residents were not included, and comments regarding the relationship or connection established with the RSC may not be representative of all residents.

3. While residents shared examples of agency, resourcefulness, and relying on community when confronting or overcoming stressors or traumas, the interview protocol for frontline staff neglected to inquire about staff observations of resident self-agency when confronting traumas, thus missing an opportunity to explore what property supports, if any, might assist in facilitating this type of agency. Failing to ask this question also resulted in a missed opportunity to gather examples of resident agency and resourcefulness that could have proved useful when internally articulating the importance of promoting resident agency and voice.

4. The interview instrument did not include explicit questions about race relations among residents or racial equity. In hindsight, the interviews would have benefited from including explicit questions about race. Future research should consider the racialized experience of both residents and front line staff, and how engagement strategies and property culture reflects the experiences of the people and communities residing in a given property.

5. Leadership perspectives reflected in this research are limited to those focused on resident services.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Many mission-driven developers and resident services providers have a core value of being resident-centered. Others are starting to re-prioritize resident engagement due to the growing evidence that demonstrates the importance of agency and perceived control on a person's health and well-being. However, housing practitioners often find it difficult to operationalize this value in the daily business of managing the real estate, providing services, and meeting the requirements of investors and funders. Making this commitment real requires a significant paradigm shift and commitment at every level within an organization. This project aimed to better understand places where existing processes or assumptions about resident priorities have limited opportunities for more meaningful resident engagement, and limited residents' voice and agency. In addition, we identified a number of opportunities for owners to examine and rethink how resident engagement is defined, how information gets prioritized, shared, and communicated with residents, and how residents could be and would like to be included differently in decision-making processes.

This research concluded prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has resulted in major shifts in how property owners engage with residents and offer the use of community spaces. Additionally, the pandemic has resulted in large losses of life and livelihoods, with the largest disparities seen among Blacks and Latino populations. As of October 13, 2020, the age-adjusted COVID-19 mortality rates for Blacks, Latinos, and Indigenous Peoples are more than 3 times the rate for Whites.[12] A recent study conducted by researchers at University of New Hampshire's Carsey School of Public Policy found that from March through September 2020, thirty-nine states have lost more jobs than during the Great Recession, with the accommodation and food service industry experiencing the greatest losses.[13] Finally, researchers at the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University found that Black and Hispanic and renter households are more likely to have lost income because of COVID-19.[14]

All this loss is likely to lead to increased levels of anxiety and trauma across large swaths of the U.S. population. Affordable housing residents may be particularly vulnerable as renters and members of other populations most likely to experience a disproportionate amount of adverse impacts of the pandemic. Additionally, many of the most effective recommendations for preventing community spread of COVID are recommendations that limit social and other daily activities, which exacerbate social isolation. In accordance with guidance from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, owners are restricting the use of community spaces to prevent groups of more than six people from congregating. These spaces are no longer freely available for residents to gather and use—a function that many residents in this study indicated allowed them to feel valued, included, and an active participant in community life.

Owners, resident services, and other property staff have come up with a variety of ways to combat the social isolation that may result from social distancing. They have conducted telephonic check-ins and implemented

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12 AMP Research Lab. (2020, October 15). The Color of Coronavirus: COVID-19 Deaths by Race and Ethnicity in the U.S. [Data Viz]. https://www.apmresearchlab.org/covid/deaths-by-race

13 Ettlinger, M. & Hensley, J. (2020, October 20). COVID-19 Economic Crisis: By State. [Research Publication]. https://carsey.unh.edu/COVID-19-Economic-Impact-By-State

14 Cornelissen, S. & Hermann, A. (2020, July 7). A Triple Pandemic? The Economic Impacts of COVID-19 Disproportionately Affect Black and Hispanic Households. [Blog Post]. https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/blog/a-triple-pandemic-the-economic-impacts-of-covid-19-disproportionately-affect-black-and-hispanic-households

technology solutions to connect residents to family members and service providers from the comfort of their units. However, it is unclear which community engagement and resident empowerment strategies are best suited to this new era of avoiding social gatherings in enclosed spaces or engaging with others at a distance of six feet or greater, particularly when access to or comfort with technology is limited. As the pandemic—and our responses to it—continue to evolve, the next phase of research must explore how owners can build a culture of resident empowerment in the midst of a pandemic and public health measures that reduces not only disease risk but individual autonomy and opportunities for social connection.

While the world has confronted the COVID-19, the United States is undergoing a reckoning on centuries of unjust and racist policies. The dialogue around race, power, and policy has highlighted the degree to which power has been taken or withheld from communities of color and ways in which voices of people of color have been excluded from major decisions. These power imbalances may be particularly pronounced in affordable housing due to the convergence of policies and economic consequences that contribute to a disproportionate number of people of color residing in assisted affordable housing and the concentration of affordable housing properties in racially concentrated neighborhoods. Affordable housing operators have an opportunity to begin addressing these injustices with a strategic commitment to lifting up the voices of residents, especially people of color, fostering agency and well-being, and giving power back to residents and communities in how they operate rental properties from the acquisition stage through long-term operations. This limited research did not specifically address race. The next phase of the research should consider the racialized experience of both residents and frontline staff and consider how engagement

Photo courtesy of BRIDGE Housing.

and culture may need to be tailored to incorporate the experiences of the people and communities served by a given property.

Further, this research did not explore methods to effectively communicate with or meaningfully incorporate the voice of residents with undertreated or destabilizing mental health issues, who may not comprehend the rationale behind rules, regulations, or changes no matter how thoughtfully conveyed. Future research should incorporate the experience of, and resident engagement strategies used by permanent supportive housing providers, many of whom are long-term advocates of trauma-informed care and approaches.

Finally, this research points to areas for further exploration in SAHF's Outcomes Initiative. SAHF members collect and analyze resident outcomes data to understand resident needs and tailor programming, and share this data with SAHF to benchmark to the larger portfolio and help communicate the impact of stable affordable homes. This research has stressed the need to continue identifying effective practices for communicating with residents around data collection and sharing data back with residents. SAHF and its members are also exploring outcomes indicators that help us understand and measure residents' sense of agency.

CONCLUSION

A stable, affordable home is a foundational determinant of health and when enhanced by resident services can further support health and well-being and provide a platform for addressing equity gaps for people of limited economic means. Those benefits are best realized, and more equitable communities are created, when residents have a voice in decisions made about their home and a sense of agency that is supported at home. However, the regulatory framework, organizational structures, and cultures that surround the operation of affordable rental homes can create barriers to residents gaining power and voice in how a property is operated and constrain their sense of agency.

This research revealed the strong impact that frontline staff and property operations have on residents. From connections with staff to a desire to have greater choice in how common spaces are used, residents shared actions operators can take to improve resident satisfaction and foster community when partnering with residents. Approaches that offer residents a greater voice in their homes and remove barriers to shifting power to residents can support agency and well-being and are a building block to more just and equitable communities. In order to operationalize these strategies at the property level, leadership at all levels must support these approaches and equip teams to consider the nature of and opportunity for resident voice in different types of tenant engagements.

Further research is needed to understand evolving challenges to resident agency and strategies for fostering resident voice in a post-COVID world, specifically with a racial equity lens. Shared decision-making, increased information/data sharing with residents, and integration of trauma-informed practices are three concrete strategies that can be applied to better incorporate resident experience and perspective into property operations, foster greater collaboration with residents, and support increased sense of agency and autonomy amongst residents. Owners can begin to apply these strategies by seeking opportunities to engage residents in a wider range of property decisions, identify procedural and regulatory barriers to giving residents greater voice and choice in how their homes are operated, and explore training on trauma-informed approaches for staff at all levels.

Photo courtesy of Mercy Housing.

APPENDIX: FOCUS GROUP THEMES

TOPIC	FOCUS GROUP THEMES
Property Life & Life Goals	Seniors and younger families emphasize different aspects of convenience and access.
	Families often describe a future that included moving out of the property.
	A stable living situation allows seniors to care for others, something they value highly.
	Staff have a significant role in cultivating an environment that promotes authentic community building.
	Formal resident leadership roles are not always enough to provide decision-making opportunities.
	Additional programming and public safety stand out as specific areas for change among residents.
	The social environment created by staff for the property matters deeply to residents.
Data	Participants want information for two primary reasons: to get something done and to understand their own experience in the context of everyone else's experiences.
	Understanding why sensitive information is being collected is more important to residents than issues of privacy.
	Effective ways to communicate information with residents relates directly to feelings of social connectedness and self-efficacy
Trauma-informed	When residents identify trauma, they consider the broad spectrum represented with equal importance
	Residents have clear perceptions of safety related to both inside the housing community and outside in the surrounding neighborhood, whether physical barriers separate them.
	Residents have a broad spectrum of coping mechanisms in place, including formal and informal responses. Community was often mentioned.
	Participants' stories of stress often include problem-solving as well as coping mechanisms, *implying that a level of control helps to address issues.*
Resident Choice	Residents are easily able to identify physical elements of the property that detract from their overall well-being.
	Residents feel that holding a set of shared values for their property/community matters to them, whether or not they feel engaged
	The perceived relationship between RSCs and "management" is important for building trust between residents and resident services staff
	The relationship between residents and RSCs is deemed an important one.
	Residents' relationship to the community outside the property is often complicated.
	RSCs play a critical role for residents at the property.
	Small gatherings to discuss topics of interest to residents can be beneficial for residents.
	Broader social and racial dynamics play a role in relationships among residents.

STEWARDS OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING FOR THE FUTURE

Stewards of Affordable Housing for the Future (SAHF) is a nonprofit collaborative of 13 multi-state nonprofit affordable housing providers who own more than 147,500 affordable rental homes. SAHF's mission is to advance the creation and preservation of healthy, sustainable affordable rental homes that foster equity, opportunity, and wellness for people of limited economic resources.

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