Case Study

Community Solutions to Affordable Housing: Civic Engagement on a Fundamental Public Health Issue.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) defines affordable housing as the condition of spending less than 30% of one’s income on housing (including utilities). Cost-burdened is the designation by HUD of spending 30-50% of income on housing, and any greater percentage is designated as severely cost burdened. The target population for this study is Riley County, where 54.9% of renters are cost-burdened, making it the fourth most cost-burdened county in Kansas. Riley County is home to two highly transient populations: military families with nearby Ft. Riley, and college students attending Kansas State University or Manhattan Christian College. Competition is high for properties in central locations of Manhattan, both for renters and homeowners. Given the high rental prices in Riley County (median rent in Riley County = $884; KS = $757), it is unsurprising that would-be resident owners can experience cost-burdened mortgages, as single or even double-income households compete with multi-tenant properties. Riley County median wages are below the state median, even after accounting for students (e.g. full-time, year-round workers in Riley County = $35,149 vs. KS = $41,226). Within Riley County, disparities of income have increased. The Gini Index, a measure of income distribution on a scale from 0-1 where 0 = perfect equality and 1= perfect inequality, has risen 4% from 0.448 in 2007 to 0.484 in 2015 (U.S. Census). Since 2007, median monthly rental costs have increased by 30.6% while the median income for renter occupied housing units has increased by only 19% (adjusted for inflation).

High rates of cost-burden are a significant health risk to individuals, families, and communities. Cost-burdened individuals may work long hours or multiple jobs, have less income to purchase food or medicine, and experience elevated stress, all of which adversely impact health. This burden is shared with the community in various ways (e.g. diminished economic activity, educational achievement, worker productivity, increased burden on the healthcare system). Yet despite widespread acknowledgement of the problem of affordable housing by public agencies and non-profit organizations, local citizen engagement in developing solutions has been sporadic and insufficient to address the increasing demand for income-based housing offered by HUD and other programs.
Recognizing the need for community-based solutions by engaging all stakeholders in the local housing system, an informal coalition formed in 2016 that unites university faculty and students with non-profit organizations focused on low-to-medium income housing. Manhattan Kansas Affordable Housing Community Action Group began as a series of questions and documented research efforts by participants who saw the need for better representation of the citizenry at critical governmental hearings, such as annual Community Development Block Grant working sessions in city government. The very same cost-burden can become a barrier to representation in public meetings, highlighting the need for accessible, facilitated work sessions among those affected by affordable housing challenges. AHCAG has conducted interviews at social service events such as Everybody Counts, to amplify federal/state housing and income data with local narratives describing the details of coping with disparities, and strategies for overcoming barriers in the housing system. These interviews have demonstrated a rich source of community-based solutions that now require a more inclusive, systematic program of public deliberation to achieve. One such grass-roots type solution is the construction of a twelve-unit single family housing complex that will house low to moderate, rent assisted, single families using federal, state, and local tax dollars and tax incentives. The AHCAG has asked you to assist in locating a construction site in the greater Manhattan City area that will be suitable for such a project. You have agreed to assist by creating a Charrettes style community forum to assist in locating the best three sites possible.

**Things to Consider:**

Who needs to be at the table as the design team for the Charrette activity (Activity Sheet 1)

Who needs to be at the community forum Charrette? (Activity Sheet 3)

How much land will this project require?

What values might community members hold for this project? (the need for more affordable housing, a desire to rehab old or dilapidated existing housing, maintain a sense of community, etc.)

What values might community members hold against this project? (Not in My Backyard, not willing to support government handouts, need to protect existing property values, don’t want to see historic structures raised, etc.)

What public service considerations need to be taken into account for locating this project? (Schools, public transportation routes, access to food, healthcare, etc.)
Other considerations you can think of that need to be taken into account?

What Resources will you need:

What maps will assist with this project? (Find ONE and print it and bring to class)

Ex: https://cityofmhk.com/DocumentCenter/View/33354/Street-Map


What data will assist with this project? (Locate TWO data sets and bring them to class)

Ex: https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/manhattancitykansas/PST045217


Other Resources that might be of value to the process