



ARLINGTON
VIRGINIA

Housing Assistance Bureau

Arlington Housing Choice Voucher Program

Five-Year Plan Community Engagement Sessions

Key Findings Report | February 2025



R E I N G O L D

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Background

Background

- In January 2025, market research contractor Reingold supported the Arlington Housing Choice Voucher Program (AHCVP) in coordinating eight community engagement sessions to gather feedback on the goals, objectives, and policies of AHCVP's Five-Year Plan.
- Respondents (n=74) included participants in Arlington Housing Assistance Bureau (HAB) programs and other community stakeholders.¹ One session was conducted in Spanish among Spanish-speaking HAB participants.
- Sessions lasted 90 minutes and were held in-person at local community centers and via virtual video conference.
- The session format involved a high-level exploration of participants' experiences with affordable housing in Arlington and a detailed discussion of the draft goals being considered for inclusion in AHCVP's 2025–2030 Five-Year Plan.
- Resulting community input will inform potential revisions to AHCVP's Five-Year Plan.

¹ Arlington County's Department of Human Services' Housing Assistance Bureau (HAB) programs include the federally funded Arlington Housing Choice Voucher Program (AHCVP), federal, state and locally funded Permanent Supportive Housing (PSH) programs, locally funded Housing Grants program and, through the Arlington Continuum of Care (CoC), federally funded PSH programs and the federal, state and locally funded Rapid Re-Housing programs.



AHCVP Five-Year Plan: Seven Draft Goals

1. Expand the **supply** of affordable housing
2. Increase **quality** of affordable housing
3. Increase affordable housing **choices**
4. Provide an **improved living environment**
5. Promote **self-sufficiency** and asset development of participating households
6. Ensure **equal opportunity** and fair housing
7. Establish **separate waitlists** for tenant-based vouchers and project-based vouchers



Sessions Overview

- **Focus Group Discussions with HAB Participants** | Arlington Mill Community Center
 - English speakers
 - Jan. 16 at 4 p.m.
 - Jan. 16 at 6 p.m.
 - Jan. 21 at 4 p.m.
 - Spanish speakers
 - Jan. 21 at 6 p.m.
- **Community Town Hall Discussion** | Lubber Run Community Center
 - Jan 23 at 6 p.m.
- **Focus Group Discussions with Community Stakeholders** | Virtual
 - Arlington County staff | Jan. 28 at 1 p.m.
 - Landlords and property managers | Jan. 29 at 1 p.m.
 - Non-profits, advocacy groups, commission chairs | Jan. 30 at 1 p.m.



Reporting Methodology

- Each session was audio recorded and transcribed for analysis. Reingold conducted qualitative thematic analysis to identify salient themes across sessions.
- Insights reported reflect representative, relevant, and/or actionable views that were conveyed by one or more participants during the sessions.
- Reported insights do not necessarily reflect the consensus view of a given session. Due to the time-limited nature of the sessions, not all participants had opportunity to comment on every discussion item.



Participant Demographics

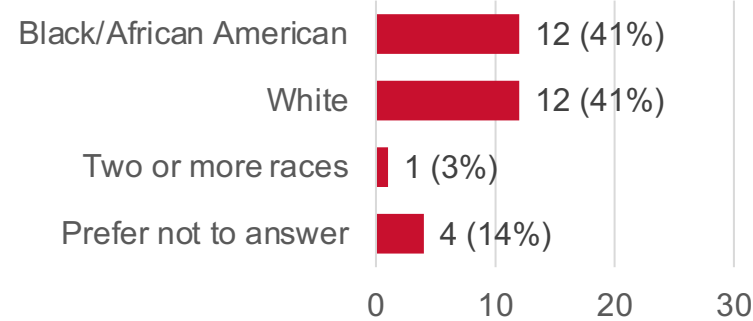
Community Engagement Session Participation

Audience Segment	Sessions	Participants
HAB program participants, English-speaking	3	19
HAB program participants, Spanish-speaking	1	10
Arlington County community, including HAB program participants	1	14
Stakeholders: Landlords	1	10
Stakeholders: Arlington County staff	1	8
Stakeholders: Nonprofits and affordable housing advocacy groups	1	13
Total	8	74

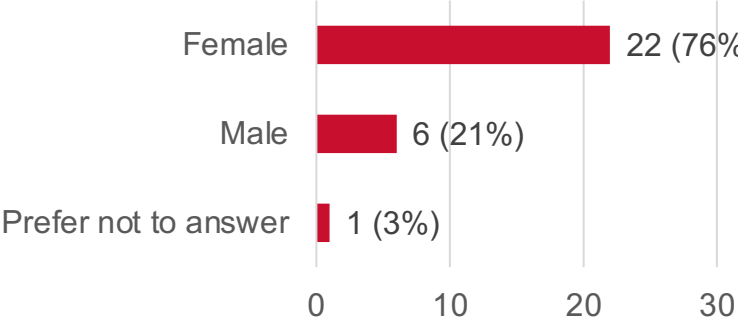


Session Demographics: HAB Program Participants

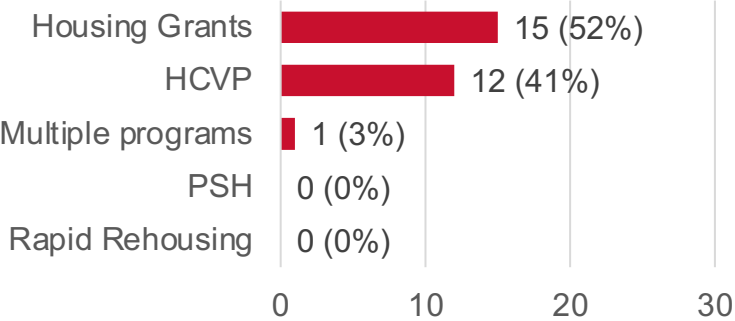
Race



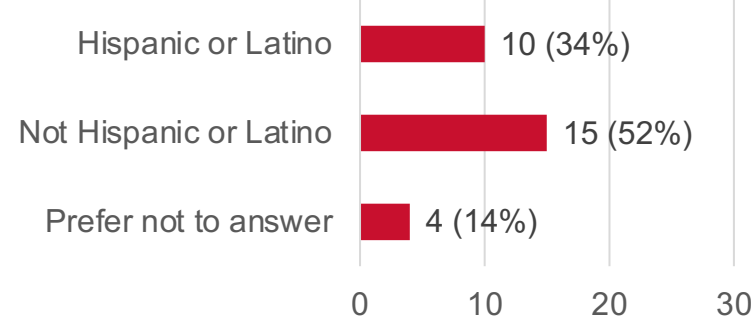
Gender



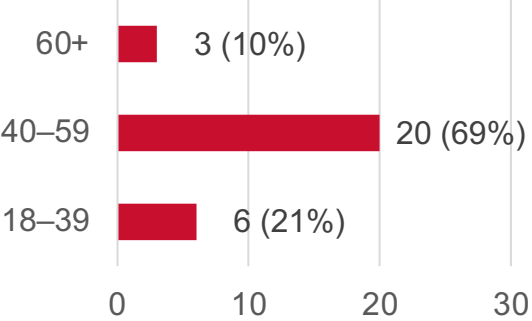
HAB Program



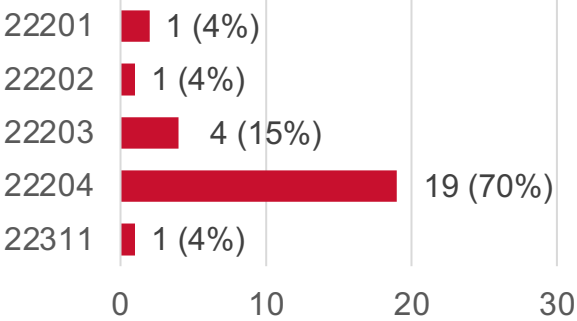
Ethnicity



Age

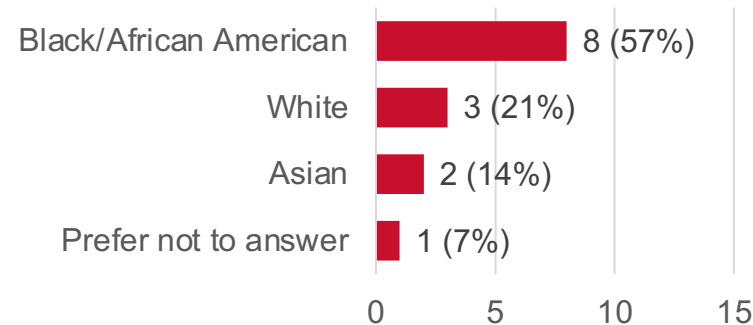


ZIP Code

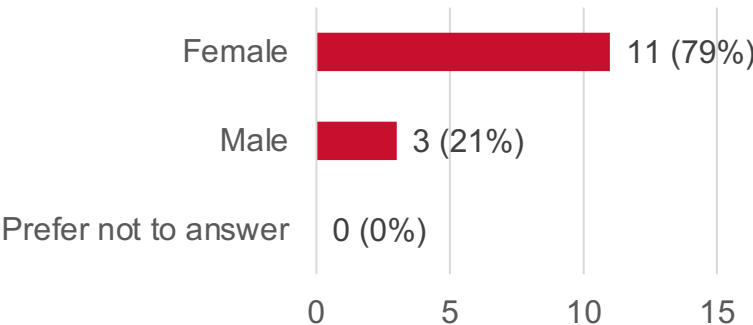


Session Demographics: Community Town Hall

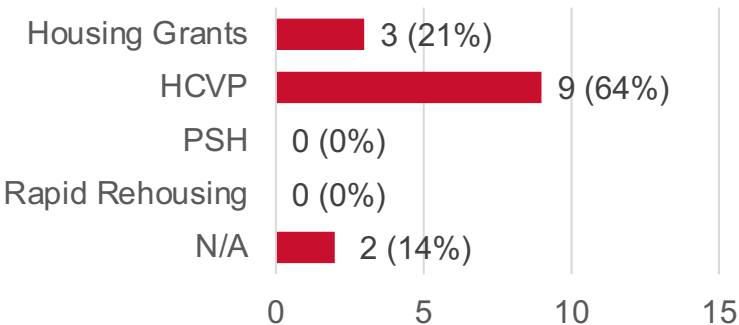
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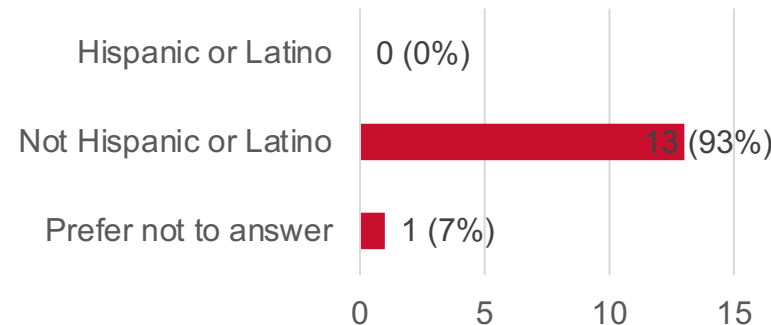
Gender



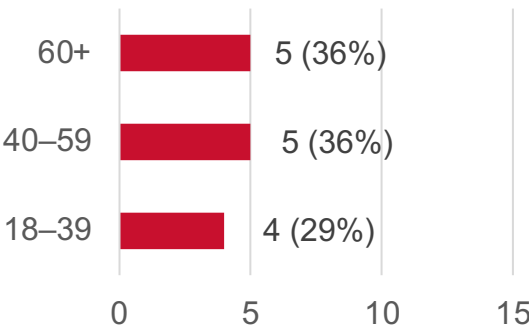
HAB Program



Ethnicity



Age



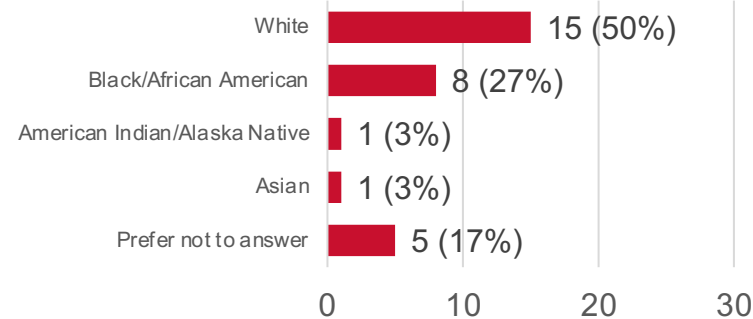
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ZIP	n (%)
22200	1 (7%)
22201	2 (14%)
22203	1 (7%)
22204	5 (36%)
22205	1 (7%)
22206	2 (14%)
22207	1 (7%)
22209	1 (7%)

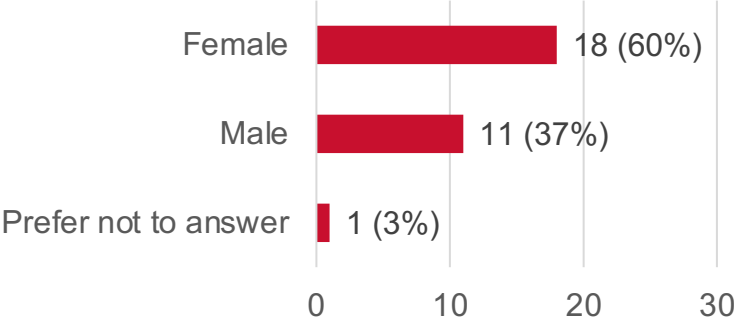


Session Demographics: Community Stakeholders

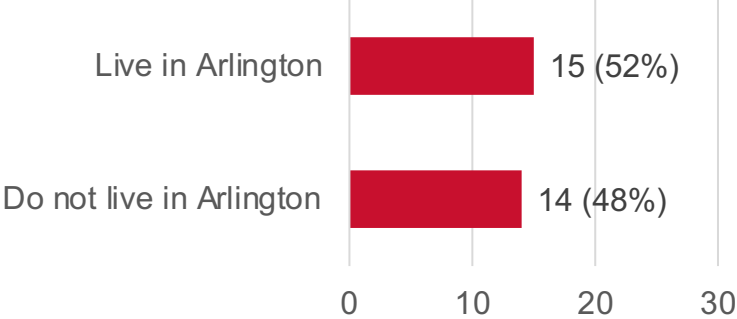
Race



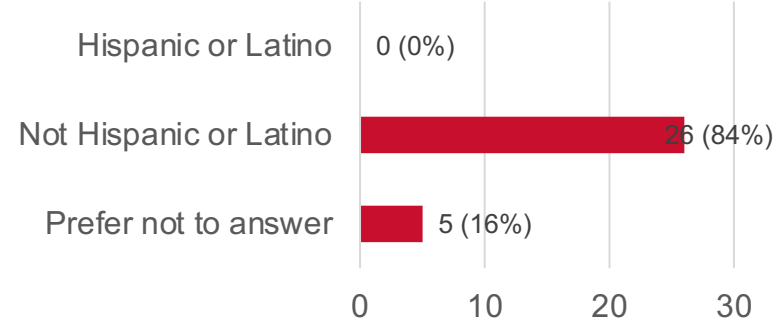
Gender



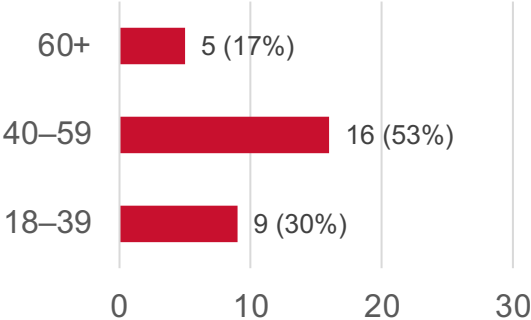
Residency



Ethnicity



Age



Key Findings

Community Focus Groups (English)

Perspectives: Housing Access and Choice

- Some participants felt they needed to take whatever unit they could get once they became eligible for housing assistance.
 - Some felt the practice of renting units without a walkthrough first is unfair.
 - Some participants wanted more time to find a suitable unit.
- Some participants wanted more and better customer support to understand the process and their housing options, including:
 - More personalization and tailored options for navigating property selection and waiting lists
 - Clear communications about program requirements and “what they’re getting into.”
 - Transparency into which properties in Arlington accept housing choice vouchers beyond the published list of committed affordable units.
 - Clarity around the tradeoffs between the different voucher types.



Perspectives: Housing Access and Choice

- Some participants felt the process to apply for affordable housing requires too much paperwork and “red tape” that seems intended to disqualify applicants.
- Participants had mixed experiences with County housing specialists – some found their specialist extremely helpful; others found their specialist impatient and not clear enough in their guidance.
- Some participants believe the lottery system for awarding vouchers from the waiting list disadvantages those who have waited for a long time.
 - Some believe that people who are ineligible for the voucher apply to the waiting list, potentially taking the spots of eligible residents.
 - Some assumed a separate waiting list for project-based vouchers would still take years.
- One participant felt that shortening the requirement for notice to vacate (e.g., from 60 to 30 days) could enable tenants to seize on timely opportunities to move to more favorable units.



Perspectives: Housing Experience and Quality

- Many participants believe that older buildings are more likely to have maintenance and security issues than newer buildings.
 - One participant said that, in their experience, many affordable properties require repeated maintenance to fix the same issues.
 - Broken laundry machines were a common concern for many participants.
 - Many participants had concerns about pests; some had concerns about safety in and around affordable properties.
- Access to grocery stores, transportation, and job opportunities was not a concern for most participants.
- A few participants believe that once tenants are “locked in” to a voucher, property managers have less incentive to properly maintain the property.



Perspectives: Self-Sufficiency and Fair Housing

- Some participants feel stigmatized or prejudiced against by landlords and maintenance staff for renting with a voucher.
- Some participants believe landlords are aware of the voucher program's budget and participant income limits and may increase rents accordingly.
- Some participants feel access to amenities and treatment from property management staff is of lower quality for affordable renters. Many feel that reporting violations often falls on deaf ears.
- Some participants expressed that the voucher program should empower participants to move on from the voucher rather than become dependent on it – however, this may vary with individual circumstances, e.g., for a person with a disability who cannot work.
 - Some participants felt that an escrow program allowing tenants to work toward ownership could help advance self-sufficiency.



Key Findings

Community Focus Group (Spanish)

Perspectives: Housing Access and Choice

- All participants in this session felt they had to “settle” for an affordable unit vs. having different options. Many feel tied to their current property because they believe they won’t get approved to rent elsewhere with their voucher.
- Many participants felt the requirements and amount of paperwork to apply for affordable housing are too onerous.
- Some participants said they don’t make enough money to cover their rent even with assistance, so they must make tradeoffs between paying the rent and priorities like feeding their children.
- Some participants feel discriminated against by their apartment complexes because they have children or children with disabilities.
- Some participants feel they are not qualified for available jobs in their area and that affordable childcare isn’t available.



Perspectives: Housing Experience and Quality

- Many participants said they feel unsafe in their properties, with building security doing little to address issues. Experiences reported include people breaking doors due to not having a fob to enter the building and people sleeping in laundry rooms.
- Some participants believe that buildings rush to address maintenance issues when they know that the County is coming for inspections, but when tenants need something fixed, maintenance takes a very long time. Common concerns included broken elevators, lack of hot water, doors that won't close, pests, and mold.
- Some participants said that property managers and leasing staff are frequently rude and won't listen to their needs. Some participants feel they are particularly subject to retaliation against reporting problems because they receive affordable housing assistance.
- Some participants said that while buildings may have amenities such as gyms, they are often closed or the machines are broken.



Key Findings

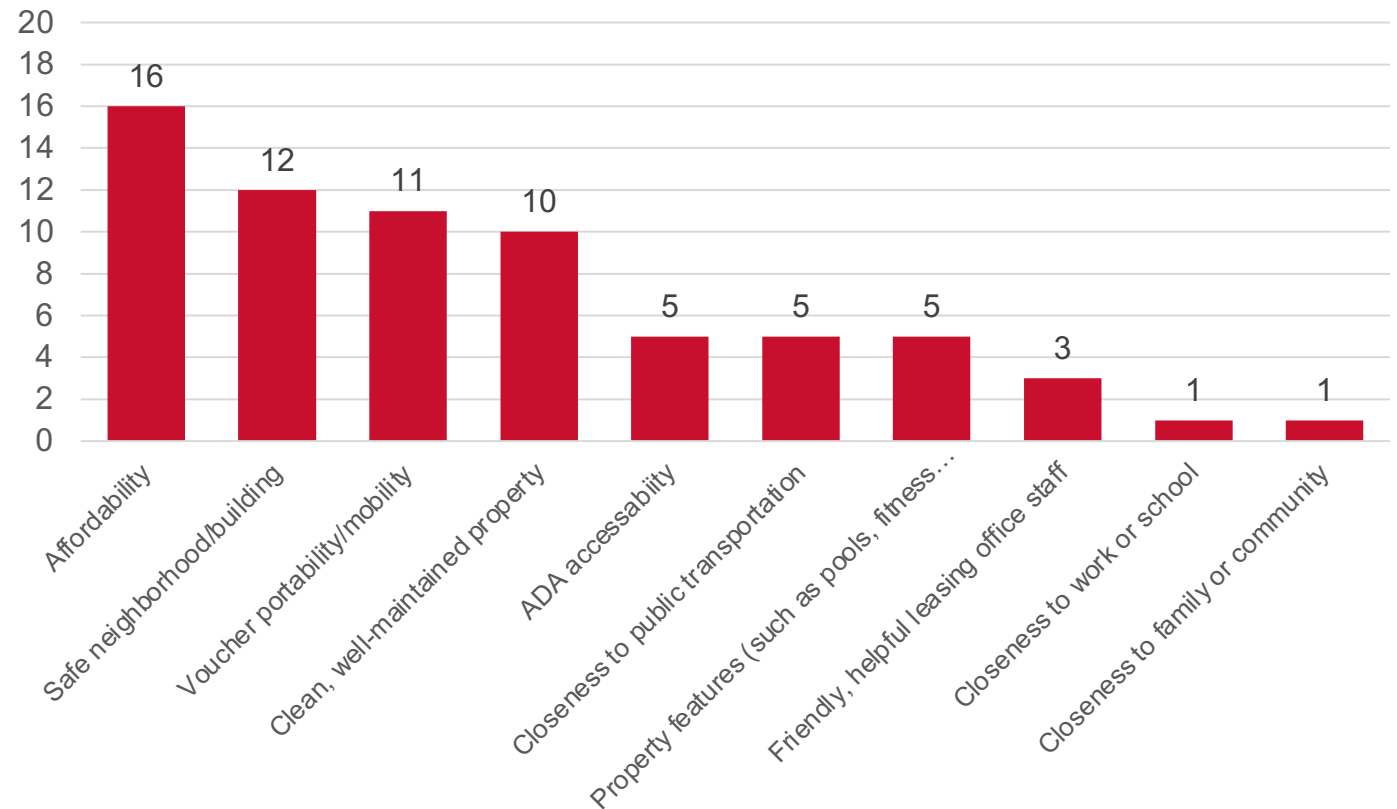
Values Ranking Exercise

Top Housing Considerations

At the conclusion of the four focus groups among HAB participants (English/Spanish), respondents were asked to indicate the three factors most important to them when obtaining housing.

Affordability (defined as paying less than 30% of income toward housing) was most cited as a top factor.

"Please mark the three factors that are most important to you when considering your housing options." (n=21)



Key Findings

Community Town Hall

Perspectives: Housing Access and Choice

- Some participants said that rent prices and the cost of living in Arlington have risen in recent years, making it difficult for many to cover their rent even with assistance. Some expressed that affordable childcare is particularly hard to find.
- Some participants said they would value additional housing options including single-family houses and housing for seniors and individuals with disabilities.
- Some participants said they would value more programming supporting a progression to homeownership.
- Some said that forums to educate tenants for whom English is their second language about affordable housing options would be valuable.



Perspectives: Housing Experience and Quality

- Some participants feel they can't report maintenance concerns for fear of retaliation from property managers. They said they have seen lease renewals rejected and tenants receiving eviction notices as forms retaliation.
- One participant said property managers may retaliate against tenants who are immigrants, thus raising fears of immigration enforcement action.
- Many participants are not aware of where to report retaliation. One participant suggested an anonymous hotline for reporting concerns could be a valuable resource for reassuring against retaliation.
- Some participants expressed that building amenities such as fitness equipment are frequently out of order. Some said amenities such as event rooms are often closed to affordable renters.
- Some participants said that their complexes hold monthly community meetings where tenants can share concerns. Some agreed that more County involvement in establishing community networks or tenant boards to address building issues could be valuable.



Key Findings

Stakeholder Focus Group: County Staff

Perspectives: Housing Access and Choice

- One participant stated that AHCVP plays an important role in accommodating vulnerable populations who may otherwise be unable to afford to rent in Arlington, including young adults transitioning from foster care and individuals experiencing domestic abuse.
- One participants stated that ACHVP should more closely match affordability levels to the needs in the population. There are more than 9,000 households in Arlington below 30% AMI.
- Some participants expressed that getting landlords along the metro corridor and bus routes to participate in the voucher program should be a priority. The Crystal City and Pentagon areas are major transit and jobs centers but have the least affordable housing.
- One participant stated that there is often community resistance to new affordable developments, particularly along Metro corridors, often due to stigmas associating poverty with drug use.
- One participant stated that to encourage more landlords to participate, Arlington should provide greater incentives (e.g., tax breaks) and make voucher acceptance an enforceable requirement based on number of units.
- One participant stated that ACHVP's policy for accommodating live-in caregivers could be clearer.



Perspectives: Housing Access and Choice

- One participant said that property-based vouchers are less suited to populations that tend to move a lot — e.g., those with mental health needs who may have conflicts with property managers or other residents.
- One participant said that while property-based vouchers encourage tenants to hold onto them indefinitely, some people are unable to age in place and will need to move.
- One participant said that additional populations AHCVP should prioritize for property-based vouchers include older adults who may be pushed into homelessness and youth aging out of the foster care system.
- Some participants expressed that if ACHVP opts to pursue separate waiting lists for tenant-based and property-based vouchers, applicants should be clear about the implications for which list they choose, balancing expediency of receiving a voucher with their specific needs.



Perspectives: Housing Experience and Quality

- Some participants expressed that standard features in market-rate developments should also be standard in affordable developments. Developers may invest in lower-quality building materials if they know that a building is designated for affordable housing.
- One participant stated that code enforcement is a complaints-based system; the County doesn't have the ability to proactively inspect properties using code enforcement.
- Some participants expressed that locked building entry and security cameras are important safety features.
- Some participants expressed in-unit washers and dryers are particularly valuable for tenants who have kids.
- Some participants said that affordable renters often have complaints about rodents and unresponsive landlords.



Perspectives: Self Sufficiency and Fair Housing

- One participant stated that ACHVP should be more intentional about getting people out of poverty vs. perpetuating cycles of poverty. Another participant noted that their client was able to go back to school and increase their income so no longer needed a voucher, feeling that the voucher had served its purposes.
- One participant stated that tenants who increase their income would lose the voucher whether they go \$100 or \$1,000 over the cap; to support economic independence, AHCVP should have greater flexibility to look at factors beyond income alone.
- Some participants expressed that services like matched savings programs, programs to repair credit, and financial coaches could be helpful toward encouraging financial independence.
- Some participants expressed that not enough affordable licensed childcare is available to voucher participants. Residents are often in the predicament of not being able to work — and so unable to improve their economic situation — if they don't receive a childcare subsidy.
- Some participants expressed that landlords need more education about fair housing laws; AHCVP should ensure participants are aware that they can't be denied tenancy based on having a voucher as their source of income.



Perspectives: Agency Coordination

- One participant stated that some residents participating in the voucher program are out of compliance with other benefit programs (e.g., may be committing SNAP fraud); County agencies should better coordinate to ensure compliance.
- One participant stated that, given the length of time required to receive a voucher, the County should have a better sense of where AHCVP fits in the continuum of housing services (e.g., supplemental to Permanent Supportive Housing) to support better planning.
- Some participants agreed that ACHVP could benefit from additional housing specialist staff to meet program demand.



Key Findings

Stakeholder Focus Group: Landlords and Property Managers

Perspectives: Housing Access and Choice

- One participant shared that, between land and development costs, it is typically cost-prohibitive to build new affordable developments in Arlington (upwards of \$50–\$100 million).
 - In recent history, government funding has been the only means to counteract market forces. Because of high costs, nonprofits dedicated to affordable housing often look outside of Arlington for development opportunities.
 - There is potential to convert vacant office buildings, but that would require a long-term study.
- One participant said that high-end, luxury properties are replacing potential affordable housing stock.
- Some participants expressed that affordable properties are concentrated along Columbia Pike; North Arlington offers opportunities for additional development, but this has historically been opposed by the community.
- One participant said that the cost of maintaining buildings is also increasing, and tenants typically don't want to pay increased fees.
- Some participants shared that small property investors (with fewer than five units) have a choice to not take vouchers, and most choose not to. They said more landlords may be receptive to taking vouchers if they had greater tax incentives.
- Some participants felt that there is a lack of information and misinformation regarding landlords accepting vouchers and that property managers often have to educate residents about the process. They felt the County can provide greater education to voucher participants on an ongoing basis.



Perspectives: Housing Access and Choice

- Some participants said that the paperwork associated with HCVP is onerous for landlords and many don't want to deal with it. One participants said that Arlington's process is nevertheless better than that of neighboring jurisdictions like DC.
- One participant said there are often delays in approvals when vouchers are renewed or landlords request an increase in rent.
- Some participants felt that the workload of County staff is extremely high, often leading to processing delays. When landlords must work with tenants' caseworkers to get information, it is difficult to get a timely response.
- One participant stated that landlords would value clearer guidance on voucher coverage based on tenants' income levels vs. having to contact their case workers for this information.
- One participant said that the online portal for submitting documents has improved, and the recent return to in-person processing has sped things up, particularly for seniors who may be less comfortable with an online process.
- One participant shared that some properties require tax IDs/SSNs or have credit requirements, which can be a barrier to voucher holders.
- One participant said that partnering with local real estate associations could be helpful if agents could help their clients navigate the voucher acceptance process. Transparency around agent commissions will be important for low-income residents.



Perspectives: Housing Experience and Quality

- One participant expressed that residents have a responsibility to maintain their unit. Tenants often break things like garbage disposals and leave their units in bad condition at the end of their lease.
 - Landlords are typically responsible for resident damage. The County does not hold residents sufficiently accountable for damages or violating the terms of their lease.
- Some participants said that controlled building access and sufficient lighting are important safety features.



Key Findings

Stakeholder Focus Group: Nonprofit and Advocacy

Perspectives: Housing Access and Choice

- Some participants expressed that Arlington zoning laws are not suited to creating a sufficient supply of affordable housing. New affordable developments are often faced by zoning fights with the neighboring community.
- One participant stated their understanding that AHCVP has little ability to impact housing supply without an increase in program budget or additional vouchers from the federal government.
- One participant said that Arlington is unlike other cities in that it has little diversity of building owners and developers. There are few incentives for new developers to enter the market.
- Some participants said Arlington should consider alternative housing options such as single room occupancy (SROs) facilities and accessory dwelling unit (ADUs).
- Some participants felt program participants need better education about the type of voucher and waitlist that is best suited to their needs.
- One participant said that while project-based vouchers can be very helpful to individuals with disabilities, they could be a drawback for tenants who need to move such as those who have experienced domestic violence.
- One participant suggested that Arlington should consider reallocating project-based vouchers in a “pilot” capacity to understand if it helps create greater housing choice.



Perspectives: Housing Experience and Quality

- Some participants expressed that the quality of property management and leasing staff varies widely across the County; the County needs greater standardization in quality of affordable properties and property management staff.
 - One participant said that properties often cut corners on quality for affordable units, such as providing carpet for affordable units vs. wood or vinyl floors for market-rate units.
 - One participant suggested that property managers and maintenance staff could use sensitivity training in dealing with tenants including those who may have mental health challenges.
- Some participants expressed that the County needs more checks and balances on maintaining accountability for building quality and maintenance.
- One participant said that properties with a mix of affordable and market-rate units typically benefit the building owner rather than the tenant, who may experience greater discrimination in these contexts.
- Participants suggested potential solutions for addressing housing quality disparities including an anonymous hotline for reporting complaints, creation of an office for an independent “watchdog,” and better publicizing Arlington’s annual Tenant Summit.
- One participant stated that tenants have very little legal clout within the current system. The county should provide better communication about tenants' rights and protections against retaliation and better enforcement of fair housing discrimination.



Perspectives: Self-Sufficiency

- One participant stated that while the voucher program is helpful in preventing homelessness, it is less successful in changing long-term life outcomes and creating pathways to economic mobility
- Some participants expressed that the voucher program has little ability to promote self-sufficiency and instead incentivizes tenants to stay in affordable housing. ("The more money you make, the fewer benefits you have.")
- Some participants suggested that rather than cutting off housing assistance as soon as tenants reach a certain income threshold, the County could provide alternative or progressive supports.
 - One participant suggested that the Housing Grants program could be one option to support tenants who exceed the Housing Choice Voucher income limit.

