

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community Solutions to Affordable Housing (CSAH): 2018 Study Circle Results

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Study Circles constituted the second phase of a 2-year project funded by the Kansas Health Foundation to address cost-burdened housing, a key factor of community health. In the first phase, a participatory forum at Manhattan Public Library drew 94 residents into facilitated conversation about their personal experiences of housing, both rental and owned. This forum was preceded by private interviews with a diversity of stakeholders in the local housing system, whose narratives were featured as a stimulus to conversation at the public forum. Fifteen participants at the April 28 forum volunteered to continue meeting over the summer in two groups. The goal of these meetings was to identify and prioritize documented solutions to problems of housing affordability, for focused work by government, private, and non-profit sectors of Manhattan.

Study Circle participants attended three 3-hour work sessions from June through August and received learning resources in response to questions they raised during the meetings. Project team members from Kansas State University facilitated the group discussion and recorded the comments and questions raised by the group. At the first meeting, groups reviewed a report of feedback from the April 28 public forum, explored values associated with the concepts of “home” and “housing”, and examined the scope of work for addressing housing needs of distinct populations (e.g., students, seniors, workforce, disabled). The second meeting featured a question and answer session with City of Manhattan Community Development staff Eric Cattell and Chad Bunger, and an exercise in *Visual Thinking Strategies*, a practice of communicating using art images, led by Beach Museum director Linda Duke. At this meeting, participants were asked to refine the focus of their concerns for affordable housing.

At the third meeting, with documented examples from Manhattan and other cities, the study circles prioritized their concerns and decided on three solutions as an agenda for community action: 1) rental code enforcement, 2) housing trust fund development, and 3) neighborhood revitalization programs. Many criteria were examined in the process of selecting these solutions for future focus, among which were: increases the number of persons “at home” in MHK; results in real improvement in residents’ lives; empowers under-represented groups; has clear targets for implementation; and monitors and improves the quality of MHK housing stock. A short summary of each solution follows:

Rental Code Enforcement solutions can improve access to affordable housing in Manhattan, Kansas. Weak enforcement and the resulting decline in the quality of rental housing contributes to cost burdens on the health and home economy of tenants, cited in frequent cases of asthma and other illnesses resulting from mold, asbestos, lead paint, and poor insulation. High utility bills caused by the latter increase the cost-burden to residents who have little control over the energy-efficiency of their rented units. Lax rental code enforcement in a housing economy featuring high numbers of student or military renters contributes to a decline in the value of nearby single-family-homes, particularly in mixed-use traditional neighborhoods adjacent to the university and downtown. The greater Manhattan community can ill-afford the long-term costs of rental property neglect that result in a decline in property tax revenue and discourage investment by potential new businesses. Rental registration offers a foundation for tracking housing businesses, but the burden of reporting and ensuring follow-up of needed corrections to code violations remains with tenants in Manhattan. Their lack of knowledge, time, or fear of potential reprisal from property owners disadvantages them as players in the collaborative effort

needed to improve rental housing stock for successive residents. Mandatory, periodic inspections before a crisis-point is reached in landlord-tenant relations or property demolition would alleviate long-term costs and sustain a quantity of rental stock needed in a robust housing market. Many communities across the United States regulate and license rental businesses, including Lawrence Kansas, which complies with state requirements of tenant consent, and reports after three years a positive budget impact of the inspection service.

Housing trust funds are distinct funds established by city, county or state governments that receive ongoing dedicated sources of public funding to support the preservation and production of affordable housing and increase opportunities for families and individuals to reside in the community. Housing trust fund programs are tailored to the needs of the communities they serve, but have generally contributed to affordability in 2 ways: 1) by subsidizing the production and preservation of housing to make it accessible and suitable for low-income renters and 2) by purchasing property and land, but selling only the housing unit itself, thereby increasing its affordability (separate from the land cost) for qualifying homeowners. Low income individuals and families would benefit directly from the trust fund, as would developers who stand to receive funds for qualifying projects. The community at large benefits by an increase in workforce housing, freeing up household income for other basic needs. A variety of community stakeholders are needed to build and sustain this solution, including populations directly impacted by housing cost burden, community development staff at the City of Manhattan, local banks and credit unions, contractors, local foundations, faith organizations, Kansas State University, school board members, social service and wellness coalitions, and the local community housing development organization.

Neighborhood Revitalization Programs (NRP) offer time-limited tax rebates or abatements to property owners in a defined area, in return for their investment in improvements/renovations of the property. By state statute, the NRP formula requires agreement for that tax relief between the county, which administers the program and is charged with tax assessment, the city, and the school district. This solution is about investing in neighborhoods, whose decline contributes to unhealthy conditions for residents, loss of tax revenue to the city, and disinvestment by business. To avoid gentrification, the focus should be on low to moderate (“modest”) income areas. Combined with additional low-interest loans from a housing trust fund and other sources, this incentive could make the renovation and preservation of historically single-family homes more feasible. Determination of what neighborhood(s) to select would require research using comparative neighborhood appraisal histories, such as were provided by Riley County during the Study Circles, or data on the distribution of children in USD383 experiencing homelessness. The City of Emporia, also a university town, has engaged in NRP since 2013. Like Manhattan, some neighborhoods adjacent to campus have a high concentration of large single-family homes that have been divided into apartment units, many of which are substandard and in need of demolition or repair. Emporia State University and the city have partnered to purchase and demolish condemned housing, while private businesses have used the opportunity to construct new housing in some of the vacant lots. While a mix of restoration and re-construction would be characteristic of a local response, the opportunity for first-time homeowners to access smaller, single-family structures and improve their sustainability makes this solution appealing, particularly during a time of many vacancies and homes for sale.

The Kansas Health Foundation grant to Kansas State University has a final phrase of public dissemination, lasting to September 2019. During this time, CSAH will continue to support community efforts by providing data and documentation obtained during the research project. Additional groups will undertake tasks of advocacy and project development for solutions that attract support from the broader community.