

Center for Independent Living Focus Group

On Tuesday, August 1, individuals with a disability and caregivers/parents of individuals with a disability met with the Washtenaw County Office of Community and Economic Development staff- Teresa Gillotti and Sam Olson- at the Ann Arbor Center for Independent Living for a housing and neighborhood focus group. Overall, participants shared concerns about access to public transportation and healthcare, as well as housing affordability. Discussions about their housing and living situation informed the Assessment for Fair Housing Plan.

Facilitators: Teresa Gillotti and Sam Olson (OCED)

Participants: 8

Ideal Neighborhood Qualities

When asked, "If you could live anywhere and money was no object, what would you look for in a neighborhood?" participants described the following neighborhood qualities:

Safety/Maintained

- Quiet
- Safe
- Lighting
- No trouble
- Clean

Affordable

Diversity – colors, families, and seniors

Public spaces

- Park
- Landscaping
- Playgrounds
- Community center
- Library

Accessible

- Easy access to school, work, shopping, library
- Transportation
- Sidewalks – accessible sidewalks with curb cuts

When asked about how their neighborhood compares to these ideal neighborhood qualities, here's what people had to say:

- Lighting is not good. The streets are dark and feel unsafe.
- Public place, including parks, the landscaping, playgrounds, community centers, libraries all were positively comparable to the ideal qualities of a neighborhood.
- Transportation had mix reviews. Here are some comments shared:
 - There are bus routes, but access to the bus is questionable.
 - Transit in rural areas is not as reliable and consistent (compared to urban areas).
 - There is the need to plan around same-day, once a day reservations (for paratransit).
 - There is also the need to apply and be approved (1-time approval) for paratransit
 - The SMART bus is available in Warren, but no bike routes and the transit available is restrictive.
- There was discussion about areas having sidewalks, but left the question of whether sidewalks are accessible or not.
- Affordability was a concern among participants, remarking that rents (housing costs) in Ypsilanti and throughout the county are going up. One participant noted that, minus affordable housing and accessibility, their neighborhood met all these qualities of an ideal neighborhood.

Resources Used

Participants had learned about things like schools, programs, child care, bus routes, et cetera through CIL, networks with other parents with children with disabilities, Google, the Washtenaw County Community Mental Health (WCCMH), Mlive, the Arc of Macomb County, Disability Network, the newspaper, Radio stations like 89.1 NPR, and their medical professional.

Housing

One of eight participants currently own their home. They said they have been a homeowner for more than 10 years, and when asked if they considered their home to be affordable (including mortgage, property taxes, and insurance), they responded with yes because everything is paid off.

Five participants currently rent from private landlords. Here's the breakdown of how long they have been renting:

- Less than 2 years: 2
- 3 -5 years: 0
- 6 - 10 years: 1
- More than 10 years: 1
- No response: 1

When asked if renters consider their monthly rent to be affordable, here's what people shared:

- Kind of
- No
- It is now, but rent is going up
- Lives with daughter- rents were going up and needed a caregiver
- Without assistance, rent is too high
- The number of Section 8 units are going down

For participants who moved to their current neighborhood less than 2 years ago (rent or own), they said they moved from Ann Arbor to Ypsilanti and Pittsfield/Ypsilanti. Reasons for the move included health reasons, increased rent, and parking conditions that were poorly lit and restrictive.

Cost of Living

Facilitators switched gears to talk a little more about affordability and the cost of living, i.e. monthly mortgage or rent, utilities, transportation costs, child care, et cetera. When asked how (if at all) the cost of living in their neighborhood has changed over the past 2 to 3 years, participants shared mixed responses:

- [Cost of living is] Sky high
- Social Security is stingy
- There was discussion around the contrasts between Medicare cost of living vs. Medicaid Part B.

Utilities, medical premiums (copays/out of pocket expenses), health insurance, hospital bills and car insurance are among major expenses, after housing.

Looking for Housing

Six participants said they had actively looked for an apartment or house to rent within the last 2 years.

When participants were asked, theoretically, if they were to leave their current neighborhood(s), where would they look for housing, participants mentioned the following areas:

- Ann Arbor:
 - Grew up in the area, know people in area and has transportation
 - Police force is better
 - More diverse and progressive, and has good hospitals
 - Access to medical care, likes the culture of the university
- Downtown Ann Arbor: walk everywhere and near transit
- Ypsilanti: small

When looking for housing (in the last 5 years), participants were asked about their experience when applying to rent or trying to purchase a home they were interested in, and if they felt like their options were in any way limited or that they had been treated differently. Here's what they shared:

- Barriers
 - Money (shared by four participants): rent is too high and income too low, moving is expensive
 - Accessible units are not available
 - Accommodations (i.e. ceiling fan, walk-in shower) not available
- Treated Differently
 - Apartment complex in Downtown Saline- support staff had no pictures, application or follow-up
 - Lexington Club at Golfside- settlement- elevator was down and not maintained, no curb cuts, doors inaccessible

Themes & Strategies

To wrap things up, participants brainstormed themes that came up during discussion and some strategies to address each theme:

Themes	Strategies
Affordability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More affordable options • Change political climate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Increase programs (HOME, CDBG, LIHTC) • Improve infrastructure (i.e. US – 23) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Roads/connection to affordable housing and jobs ◦ Access to public transportation
Healthcare	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deny first time over 18(?), under 65 • Disability – ability to work • Base off parent's work history • Screening to keep people off Medicaid • Expand Medicaid
Taking care of residents	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We all want a decent, affordable place to live