

## **Stakeholder Session 1**

The membership of this meeting constituted a cross-section of private landlords, realtors, codes enforcement officers, and a local judge.

Here are several of the key issues that were discussed during the roundtable session:

### **Knowledge of Fair Housing rules**

When asked whether there was adequate knowledge among housing providers, there was some disagreement among participants. At first the response was in general a distinct lack of knowledge on fair housing rules, but it was then stated that there was a split between the type of landlord. Larger property owners that hired property managers generally provided training for those managers and made best efforts to learn and abide by fair housing rules. However, there was large agreement that smaller landlords who owned only a few properties were generally unaware of fair housing rules.

### **Inspections and Rental Registry**

There was extended discussion of how to best shape policy on inspections of rental properties. One participant commented that Ogdensburg's rental registration program was "the best thing in the world". It requires an inspection every 3 years for all rental properties, including single family and smaller-sized units, for a fee of \$75 a year. Some landlords felt that the inspection served as protection for them, as the inspection was confirmation that landlords were keeping their properties in quality condition.

However, there has been some backlash in other communities on proposals like this. In several communities, inspections are only mandatory for buildings that containing 3 or more units. However, in many locations, as noted by those from Canton, Potsdam, and Massena, single and double family homes make up the bulk of their rental properties and often have significant problems, and are essentially going uninspected. However, especially in Canton, when a rental registry or mandatory inspection is brought up, there is significant pushback from landlords and the community about overintrusion by the government. A good example of this attitude can be seen in this newspaper: <http://www.watertowndailytimes.com/news05/canton-village-officials-get-mixed-input-on-rental-registration-law-20170404>

### **Out of town landlords**

There is a general frustration expressed in many different towns about how to deal with out of town landlords. These landlords cause numerous problems, including who to contact in emergencies (carbon monoxide alarm is going off) and cause problems for codes enforcement offices to enforce violations.

### **Codes Enforcement**

There was a lengthy discussion on the current successes and challenges of codes enforcements, and ways enforcement can be improved. Most code enforcement officials try to work with landlords to remedy codes problems before enforcing codes. However, in many locations there is a large contingent of landlords who do not seem to care about complying with

codes. They will often take fines or fees as a cost of doing business rather than directly dealing with problems. When asked about the heroin epidemic, many in the room felt that this contributed to the worsening of living conditions, and often times landlords don't care about the condition of their places as long as they are receiving money and do not have to deal with problems. For example, there was a feeling in Massena that lease agreements were a joke, and that when any tenant made a codes complaint, the landlord would evict them and be able to find a new tenant, leading to a constant churn of people.

There is also a large problem with following through to actually get codes enforced. The process is lengthy and complicated. Codes officers have to go to great lengths to document all of their actions with landlords, and then to get anything enforced they have to push their cases to courts. Once they get there, there were numerous complaints that the courts are not designed to handle codes enforcement, and do not understand the process. This process is extremely expensive and time consuming for municipalities.

Codes enforcement officers also spoke of challenging situations in which they are told to "put on blinders." For example, if a one family unit is being occupied by three families, it is difficult to take action, because that could lead to some of the people occupying this house to be homeless.

### **Lack of participation in home improvement programs**

The county received several sources of funding (such as LIHTC, CDBG, HOME, etc.) for home improvement that is not being adequately used due to the complex application process. Much of the population most in need of these funds are elderly, and struggle to adequately complete the application process, especially if it is online. Many programs also require a level of investment from the property owner, which is almost never contributed. This leads to a dangerous cycle: needed funds not being accessed, leading to less funds from the federal government, to even less funds being used.

### **Possible Solutions**

- Rental registries were generally agreed as an effective way to improve pro-active inspections, although difficult to implement politically
- Municipal ticketing, in which codes officers can issue fines directly for codes enforcement without having to go to court, was praised as a great solution
- Tacking on unpaid/ignored fines by out of town landlords to annual tax bills
- A simplified, one-step process for several home-improvement funding programs, such as those worked on by GHHI at a national level, would help to get more homeowners to access needed funds. In addition, more support in the process, either from the county or non-profits
- Landlord and tenant rights and responsibilities trainings, including materials such as a model lease, application, tenants rights and responsibilities codes, etc.

## **Stakeholder Session 2**

This roundtable discussion was attended by a wide variety of service providers and lawyers, including those working with the homeless, elderly, economically disadvantaged, sick, and many others. The following is a summary of some key issues that were discussed:

### **Lack of ability to fight for Fair Housing**

There was an oft-repeated sentiment that even when fair housing violations were committed, there was a limited ability to fight back against the landlords carrying them out. One provider explained that they knew discrimination is against the law, but if they push to get their clients housed in an unwelcoming environment it will lead to them being harassed. Similarly, their clients are often in desperate need of housing, and do not have the time or resources to fight the discrimination that they face.

### **Increasingly distressing behavior from Public Housing managers**

There were several reports of inappropriate behavior increasing in recent years by those working at public housing authorities. For example, there was a story Public Housing Authority property manager in the county who deemed an apartment abandoned, even though they were told the tenant would be in Syracuse for an extended period of time to receive medical treatment. All of the tenant's belongings were taken from the apartment and thrown out. In addition, there is a lot more aggression by property managers in attempting to assert that certain elderly patients do not have the ability to live alone.

### **Landlords overstepping their bounds**

Multiple service providers stated that many landlords are too intrusive in attempting to determine whether elderly tenants are able to live on their own. Often this is well intentioned, with property managers truly believing that people need more help. Other times, this is a thinly veiled attempt to remove a tenant from the premises.

No matter what, several housing providers noted, it is not the place of these landlords to determine whether or not these tenants are able to live on their own, and these attempts could violate their fair housing rights. There was recognition that a lot of times people with severe mental health problems do wind up in subsidized housing due to the lack of other options, which was challenging for property managers, but this behavior is still unacceptable.

### **Codes Enforcement**

There was large agreement that the quality of codes enforcement varied widely throughout the county. Outside of the five major population centers, there was essentially no enforcement. Often times, the codes enforcement officer does not know that they have the power to enforce codes violations, and instead think that they are just there to issue building permits.

There is also little recourse for codes officers who come upon the worst of conditions. Buildings are often deemed to be condemnable, but codes officers are unlikely to take action because those living in the building are highly likely to become homeless if their building is condemned. Owner-occupied property was basically considered untouchable for codes, with participants

saying the idea of “rugged individualism”, in which people can choose how they live, is influential in the area.

There was also a suggestion that this poor codes enforcement especially has an impact on elderly and disabled people who cannot escape their situations. One pertinent example was brought up of a building with many rental apartments that was owned by an elderly gentleman who was a hoarder, and refused to have anyone help him keep the building up. Instead, he continuously lowered the rent until he found new tenants, who were mostly disabled or elderly and could not find rent that cheap anywhere else, and did not have the resources to get help for the awful living conditions in the building.

However, in the larger population centers, there was agreement that things have improved over the last 30 years. In Gouverneur, especially, buildings have come a long way since tenement buildings in terrible condition. It was acknowledged that enforcement certainly wasn't perfect, but was at least improving.

### **Diversity, Shifting Dynamics, and College Towns**

Many participants commented on the shifting dynamics of the county, especially in regards to college towns. While there were not often cases of blatant discrimination, one participant thought it was “naive” to not believe that landlords both in Ogdensburg and Massena, and in the college towns of Canton and Potsdam, are refusing to rent to people based on race. However, most landlords know how to obfuscate that reason, and instead blame it on bad credit or landlord reports.

This observation was followed by a discussion of more general tensions in the county regarding race, away from the housing topic. One participant attended a town hall near Massena where she heard police officers discussing deliberately setting speed traps to pull over Native Americans. There is also the idea of people coming from “downstate” and causing tensions, with a strong racial dynamic. This is evident both with the colleges, where there is increasing diversity, and in the Ogdensburg/Massena area. There have been several flashpoint incidents at SUNY Potsdam, and comments on articles in local news websites. Many people believed these dynamics could also subtly apply in the housing market.

### **The heroin epidemic and “the blacklist”**

There was widespread agreement that it is difficult for those who had previously been arrested for drug crimes to find housing, even if they had received treatment and were actively working on staying sober. The communities in the county are small towns, and arrests and problems are typically public knowledge. The Department of Social Services often classifies those coming out of addiction treatment as homeless, and housing providers are often not notified that the tenant is coming out of treatment.

Somewhat connected, there are multiple reports of a “tenant blacklist” in Massena, and many service providers say that many of their clients report being on this list. This is especially troubling due to the potential for abuse of the “blacklist,” with the potential for someone to be permanently stripped of the opportunity for housing due to calling codes or attempting to get the landlord to take care of their unit. However, it was also agreed upon that there were several good landlords in Massena that service providers enjoyed working with.

### **Stakeholder Session 3**

This roundtable discussion was attended by a variety of city, county, and town planners, and subsidized and public housing providers.

Here are some of the key issues discussed in the meeting

#### **Challenges and successes for Section 8 and public housing**

The number of assigned section 8 vouchers for the county to administer was 717 at the end of March, however the Section 8 office was told they had a few months to whittle this number down to 689. The waiting list time for Section 8 is currently 2-5 years. Attrition happens mostly through death, with most of those receiving vouchers staying on the program for a long time.

There is typically no problem with landlords refusing to take section 8 vouchers, given the housing market. However, there can be problems with finding housing that will pass Section 8 inspections.

A positive regarding Section 8 was an increase in pay standard because of rent increases in Canton and Potsdam due to student housing and in Gouverneur due to increased members of the military looking for housing.

The section 8 administrators expressed some confusion about how exactly to work with the Department of Housing and Community Renewal on how to set up preferences, such as those for veterans and victims of domestic violence.

In Massena, public housing faces a unique challenge. The given “market rate” rent is actually too high, given the rapidly decreasing demand for housing due to several factories and plants being closed. This allows private landlords to undercut the pricing for public housing, and several family units are permanently vacant, which is also exacerbated by decreasing family-age population.

#### **Colleges influence on housing market**

The presence of the colleges in Potsdam and Canton are changing both the housing market and social dynamics. In the housing market, students are increasingly moving into previously owner-occupied neighborhoods, driving up rental prices and forcing others out. There are very few rental options for middle-to-upper income individuals and families due to the presence of students, as landlords can make more money charging students per bed. In addition, as more luxury apartments are planned to be built, there is concern about the current single and double family homes being rented being abandoned, as the quality of the housing stock will be lower after neglect from tenants and landlords.

In addition, visiting professors often buy housing for when they are working in town, and then move, but keep the property as a rental. This contributes to the amount of out of town landlords who are difficult to track down with problems. In general, there is very little by way of programs to encourage local ownership of rental properties.

There was also talk of the shifting social dynamics based on increasing diversity. The group had heard of little in direct discrimination based on race in terms of finding market, largely due to the landlords need for money. However, there is often controversy in the broader community, with a key flash point being a march in town similar to a Black Lives Matter march, coverage of which can be found in this local news article:

<http://www.watertowndailytimes.com/news05/suny-potsdam-student-group-power-marches-into-potsdam-village-to-protest-against-hate-blocking-traffic-video-20151205>

### **Difficulty with near homelessness**

There was discussion about the technical definition of homelessness being too narrow, and preventing those in need from accessing services. These are often individuals or families who are sleeping on couches of relatives or friends, constantly bouncing around place to place. However, because they are not technically without a place to stay, they cannot access services that would help their predicament.


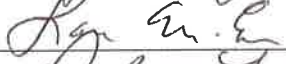
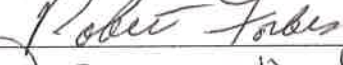

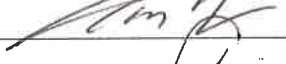
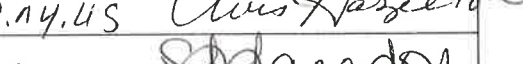



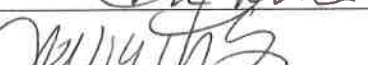
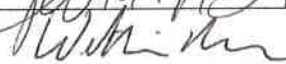


### **How to improve home ownership programs**

There was a thought that the section 8 homeownership transition program is successful for those who use it, but is overall significantly underutilized. There was a comment that many service providers did not know of these programs, and this would be a useful program to inform them of.

In addition there were suggestions of more resources for first time homeowners in general, with a focus on tenant/homeowners classes for high school seniors as a particularly good forum. Habitat for humanity runs a similar program, running homeownership classes in partnership with the North Country housing council that are mandatory for those participating in their programs.

# Stakeholders Meeting

Wednesday, April 26, 2017  
 9:30 am to 11:00 am  
 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor Conference Room, HSC  
 80 SH 310, Canton, NY

Name	Email Address	Signature
Camp, Robert	rcamp@NyCourts.gov	
Evans, Lance	levans@slcmls.com	
Forbes, Bob	brasher_code@nnymail.com	
Hadfield, Deanna	pinegrove@coniferllc.com	
Hardy, Aaron	aaron.hardy@massengd.org	
Hazelton, Avis	codeclerk@villagemassena.ny.us	
Langdon, Sherri	Sherilangdon@cupotsteam.com	
Lawrence, Russell	<del>_____</del> / cantonco@yahoo.com	<del>_____</del>
Petrosky, Dorothy	dottrealty1@gmail.com	
Sanderson, Bobbi	bsanderson@CVPotsdam.com	
Stevens, Jennifer (Stevenson)		
Tuttle, Tim	toscote@nnymail.com	
Vieths, Jennie	jcviehs@gmail.com; cantonmanor@coniferllc.com	
Neves, Wil	wneves@stlaw.co.org	
Nolan, Tim	tnolan@cantonny.us	

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# Stakeholders Meeting

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Thursday, April 27, 2017  
 9:30 am to 11:00 am  
 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor Conference Room, HSC  
 80 SH 310, Canton, NY

Name	Email Address	Signature
Colby, Lucy		
Hewitson, Sherri	sherri@cpnorthcountry.org	
Mikolay, John	jmikolay@tlnny.com	
Montgomery, Andrea	AMontgomery@stlawco.org	
Patterson, Florence		
Wilson, Sherry	swilson@accrhealth.org	
JASON POTERHAHA	J.POTERHAHA@STLAWCO.ORG	
Ed Sachs	sachs.ed@gmail.com	
Nicole Kennedy	nmkenedy@ <sup>United</sup> helpers.org	
John Mikolay	jmikolay@tlnny.com	
Sherri Hewitson	sherri@cpnorthcountry.org	
Florence Patterson	culturepiece10rg@gmail.com	
Pat Hand	40a523@stlawco.org	
Susan Gagnon	sgagnon@lasnny.org	
Lucy Elliott	Lelliott@accrhealth.org	
Christine Martin	cmartin@slche.org	
Annette Bowman	abowman@slche.org	
Micdele Woods	herpdir@slcedp.org	
Alexandra Beck	abeck@co.jefferson.ny.us	
Michael Bourcy	mbourcy@co.jefferson.ny.us	
William J. Fassinger	WJFASSINGER1221@gmail.com	
Katherine Allott	Kallott@ne.twebc.com	
Fred Hauss	fhauss@vj.potsdam.ny.us	
KERRA ZIMMERMAN	kzimmerman@stlawco.org	
ANDREA SMITH	ASMITH@COESBURG.ORG	

Afternoon

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