New Jersey Department of Community Affairs

Division of Housing and Community Resources

presents

Community Engagement

Strategies, action steps, and meeting practices for effective local engagement

Presented by Judith Drucker, M.A.
Communications Manager
Office of the Commissioner

NJ DEPARTMENT OF CommunityAffairs

Webinar Content

I. Why community engagement matters in affordable life-cycle housing planning

II. Creating an action plan to engage residents clearly and credibly

III. Using community data to inform and engage

IV. Building Coalitions

V. Addressing misinformation and building trust

Why Community Engagement Matters

Build Trust

Residents want clarity, and respect. Trust is built through collaboration not dictating.

Diffuse Conflict

Affordable housing discussions often trigger strong reactions.

Transparency

Residents want transparency, and the opportunity to understand the options and offer feedback.

Partnership

Early engagement helps create partnership, collaboration, and prevents conflict later by being invested in the planning .



Better Outcomes

Good engagement builds public trust and improves planning outcomes.

Core Goals of Engagement

Expand Knowledge

Improve public understanding of affordable housing and reframe it as life-cycle housing that is integral to creating strategic, long-term economic benefits.

Dispel Rumors

Address myths, information gaps, and concerns.

Community Values

Highlight community values and shared goals through coalition building.

On-Going Communication

Make engagement continuous, not one-time. Engagement begins prior to any project planning meeting.



Resident Value

Show residents how their input will be used.

STEP ONE · TRUST & KNOWLEDGE

Understand the Community Before You Engage It

Who lives in the community?

Who is usually heard and who is missing?

What are the community's values, concerns, and past experiences?

What local issues may shape attitudes toward housing?



What languages and communication channels are most relevant?

Action steps:

- Identify underserved or historically excluded groups
- Assess barriers to participation – language, childcare, time, location
- Speak with trusted local organizations

STEP ONE · TRUST & KNOWLEDGE

Define the Scope of Engagement

What is the municipality trying to decide?

What input is being requested?

What issues are up for discussion?

What legal, planning, or regulatory requirements already exist?



How will public input influence next steps?

Action steps:

- Prepare a one-page engagement roadmap
- State the purpose of each meeting clearly
- Explain the timeline for decisions
- Distinguish between education, feedback, and formal action

Creating an Action Plan for Communication

When you think about how to prepare communication resources for your residents, try and put yourself in their shoes

While you have your finger on the pulse of community policy and procedure: budgets, infrastructure, essential services, and future plans – most residents have never attended a council meeting

Start with listening, get community context. What is being said on social media and at past meeting public comments? Address voiced concerns before asking for comments.

Explain affordable housing basics emphasizing life-cycle concepts before discussing site-specific details

Build coalition partners with trusted community groups

Be inclusive, reduce barriers to participation i.e. time, location, language

STEP FOUR · BUILD A COALITION

Municipal Staff	**Religious Leaders**	**Commission on Disabilities**	**Cultural Groups**
Housing Advocates	**School Representatives**	**Fair Housing Groups**	**Residents**
Housing Authorities	**Councils on Aging**	**Non-profit Housing Developers**	**Tenant Advocates**
Planning Board	**Veterans Agencies**	**Social Services**	**Chamber of Commerce**
Town/City Council Members	**Transit Advocates**	**Civic Groups (League of Women Voters)**	**Business Associations**
Environmentalist Groups	**Walk/Bike Advocates**	**Interfaith Organizations**	**Racial Justice Advocates**

Creating an Action Plan for Communication

- Use simple, plain, neutral or positive language in all written and verbal communications

Share information through multiple channels to reach diverse demographics: municipal website, social media, phone messaging, newsletters, public access TV, meet the mayor, op-ed, etc.

- Announce information sessions often, through multiple channels & languages

Create an FAQ document in anticipation of questions – reference Common Myths document and prepare a simple affordable housing fact sheet geared to your town

- Prepare talking points providing clarity and direction with positivity, address known resident concerns directly

Creating an Action Plan for Communication

- ✓ Build a coalition that is invested in the solution
- Hold listening sessions, surveys, forums, be responsive to questions
- ✓ Make information session meeting recordings accessible
- Offer to speak at different locations and organizations
- ✓ Have a follow-up plan

Strategy Example Cranford Downtown Streetscape Project

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Mayor Kathleen Miller Prunty, Cranford Downtown Streetscape Project – a major revitalization initiative. DCA - $2.7 million DOT - $2.75 million. Create two plazas – improve traffic & increase pedestrian safety, address, drainage, flooding issues.

Residents and business owners invited to submit questions

Addressed in a two-episode discussion on their local public TV stations

Made information available to the public about a major downtown reinvestment project before a presentation was held at their Township Committee meeting.

Using Data to Inform and Engage

- You know your community needs clearly, but residents may not. Using data to tell the story helps to provide a foundation of understanding
- Access DCA's Data Hub and view the Municipal Housing Profile Dashboard
- What insights does the data provide?

STEP THREE · DATA

Using Data to Tell the Story of Your Community

- Data illustrates current community demographics
- Data trends help inform future planning
- Data shows who is cost burdened and who is a high earner
- Data helps to dispel myths



Data allows you to paint a picture of the friends, neighbors, local business staff, and family members who will be served by the creation of affordable life-cycle housing.

Data is the most persuasive message that you can bring to a public meeting.

Ground the Message with Data
Elevate the Message with Humanity

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

The required annual income before taxes, to sustain basic essential needs for a single adult with no children in NJ is

$56,884

PER YEAR



The median Social Security benefit for all retired workers in NJ is

$27,070.88

PER YEAR

which is the highest median payment in the nation!



If benefits are claimed early, the estimated median payment is

$23,460

PER YEAR



https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/34 © 2026 Dr. Amy K. Glasmeier and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Elevate the Message with Humanity

Deliver it With Plain-language

3,113
Residents are over 65 yrs. old

Basic life sustaining income
$56,884
PER YEAR

Median Social Security Benefit
$27,070.88
PER YEAR

Social Security Benefits Claimed early
$23,460
PER YEAR





Real people are relatable.
Data is esoteric.

Ground the Message with Data
Elevate the Message with Humanity & Plain-language messaging

- Approximately **365** single mothers run households in your community
- **3,013** are 2-person households
- **1,345** households have at least one person with a disability
- Income required to sustain basic needs as a single adult with one child in NJ is **$103,875** PER YEAR
- Income required to sustain basic needs as a single adult with two children in NJ is **$141,626** PER YEAR

Ground the discussion in data but make the facts relatable

PUT PEOPLE IN FRONT OF THE NUMBERS.

Who Lives in Affordable Life-Cycle Housing?

They may be family members, friends, teachers, public service professionals, medical assistants, staff members at local establishments, etc. etc. People that make everyday life in the community better, safer, and more productive.

They are working full-time and yet still struggling to make ends meet.



Median Income by Occupation

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Basic needs income single adult with one child in NJ is $103,875

Source: https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/34

Occupation Group	Median Salary
Management	$175,900
Legal	$144,170
Computer & Mathematical	$122,030
Healthcare Practitioners & Technical	$114,490
Architecture & Engineering	$108,280
Business & Financial Operations	$104,360
Life, Physical, & Social Science	$97,520
Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports, & Media	$81,450
Construction & Extraction	$79,330
Community & Social Service	$71,710
Education, Training, & Library	$70,630

Occupation Group	Median Salary
Food Preparation & Serving Related	$41,810
Building & Grounds Cleaning & Maint.	$42,220
Farming, Fishing, & Forestry	$42,360
Healthcare Support	$42,180
Personal Care & Service	$44,050
Transportation & Material Moving	$50,980
Production	$51,600
Office & Administrative Support	$54,250
Sales & Related	$63,940
Installation, Maintenance, & Repair	$67,570
Protective Service	$70,140

STEP FIVE · MYTHBUSTING

A vital component of Community Engagement is dispelling the myths surrounding affordable housing and providing facts and alternative perspectives to informed stakeholders.

Today, affordable life-cycle housing development takes an informed, deliberate, and integrated community approach. The NJHOMES program was developed specifically to instruct municipalities on housing models that can meet a community's housing needs uniquely and alternatively to the large-scale housing of decades past.

Now, municipal officials are tasked with informing their residents of the affordable life-cycle housing model and reframing public perception to the contemporary vision and outcomes.

Common Myths About Affordable Housing (& How to Dispel Them)

MYTHS	MYTHBUSTERS	FACTS / FIGURES
AH drives down property values! Affordable housing looks "cheap and undesirable."	**Research shows NO NEGATIVE IMPACT on neighboring home prices, market time, etc.:** • AH MUST comply with State and Federal requirements for safe, high-quality housing, often including green features. • Vacant lots and dilapidated buildings can become attractive homes instead of remaining eyesores.	**Research indicates AH has a neutral or positive effect on home prices** • Urban Institute – Alexandria Case Study • Spillover Impacts of LIHTC Developments: LA Analysis
AH is a burden on towns – more kids in schools, more municipal services!	**AH DRIVES OPPORTUNITIES for economies to thrive:** • Revitalized neighborhoods draw more local businesses, foot traffic, etc. leading to more commercial investment and increased tax base. • Workers in local businesses can live nearby, resulting in reduced commutes and higher rates of worker retention and productivity. • Municipalities benefit with new housing, new residents and additional resident spending	**Investment in AH boosts local economies and creates jobs** • NLIHC – Case for Increasing Federal Investments in AH • NAHB -Economic Impact of Home Building in a Local Area • How Tax Incentives Lay the Foundation for Housing Growth
AH brings down the community – more crime, less cohesion!	**AH brings stability and BUILDS COMMUNITY:** • More neighborhood cohesion and less crime. • Healthier families – physically and mentally. • Improved test scores and better educational outcomes for kids. • Workers who are not worried about affording their homes are better, more stable workers	**AH improves quality of life** • UC Irvine Case study shows decrease in crime • Housing and Health: An Overview of the Literature • Education Advocates are Housing Advocates
AH means large apartment buildings full of small apartments; we prefer single family homes in our community!	**ANY MODEL of housing can be affordable, single family, townhomes, duplexes and ADUs:** • Communities need many diverse types of housing • Smaller families are a growing trend across the state and the country. • Many areas with aging populations need smaller scale • Affordable "starter homes" are a growing gap in the housing market.	**There is a broad range of AH build types to fit community needs** • NJ DCA – AH Inventory by County • Missing middle housing - Local Housing Solutions
AH means freeloaders / undesirables / strangers in our community!	**People who live in AH housing are diverse, including low-to-moderate income working families, seniors, people with disabilities, and veterans** • People who qualify for AH may be caregivers, retail workers, teachers, or first responders who want to live in communities where they work. • People who may have been able to house themselves comfortably a few decades ago are met with rents they cannot afford.	**49% of the US is cost burdened** • Pew Research Center – State of AH in the US • A Closer Look at Who Lives in Affordable Housing

STEP SIX· PROJECT MEETING

You have effectively laid the groundwork of community engagement around affordable life-cycle housing goals, needs, benefits, and opportunities.

You will begin this step informed, supported, empowered and directed to achieve community goals.

Now it is time to take action and begin project planning and developing with engaged, informed residents.

The communication process begins again.

5 Key Takeaways

1) First listen, understand, then speak
2) Build community relationships and trust before project proposals
3) Build coalitions
4) Make data relatable to real people with plain language
5) Share facts and dispel myths
6) Engage the *entire* community with consistency

NJ DEPARTMENT OF CommunityAffairs

Resources

- Community Engagement Best Practices
- Common Myths About Affordable Housing
- Op-Ed Example from Neptune Township
- Living Wage Calculator: https://livingwage.mit.edu/states/34 © 2026 Dr. Amy K. Glasmeier and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology
- Strategies for Community Engagement in Affordable Housing Initiatives • affordablehousingact.org
- Community Engagement for Local Housing Decisions

Thank you for your time and attention. A copy of this presentation will be provided to all attendees.

Questions?
Judith.Drucker@dca.nj.gov

NJ DEPARTMENT OF CommunityAffairs

Follow DCA on Social Media

X: @NJDCA

LinkedIn: New Jersey Department of Community Affairs

Instagram: @NJ_DCA

Facebook: @NJDeptofCommunityAffairs