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The Community Listening Project

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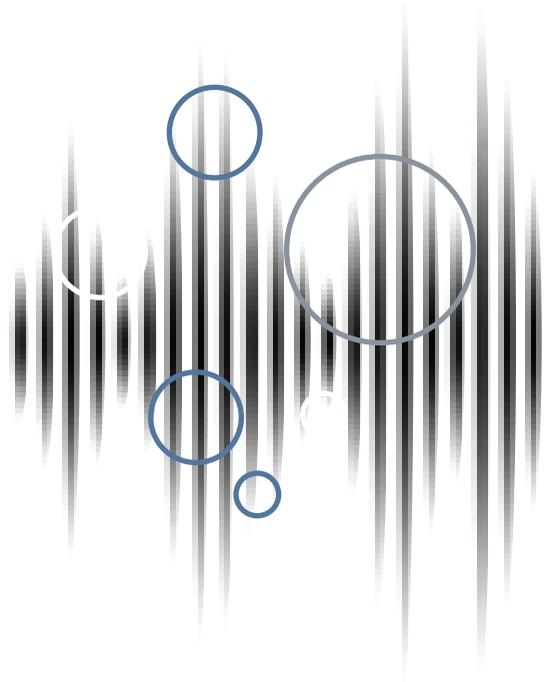
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THE COMMUNITY **LISTENING** PROJECT



Sponsored by

The DC Consortium of Legal Services Providers

Faith Mullen J.D. and Enrique Pumar Ph.D., The Catholic University of America

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



This report is the product of an effort of the DC Consortium of Legal Services Providers (“Consortium”) to learn from low income DC residents about the challenges they face and the barriers that prevent them from overcoming poverty by asking them, directly, about their most pressing problems. The Community Listening Project was envisioned as a companion to the DC Access to Justice Commission’s forthcoming report on unmet legal needs of low-income residents of the District of Columbia. Both the Community Listening Project and the Access to Justice Commission’s legal needs study are intended to provide critical information to enable the community, and civil legal aid providers in particular, to make difficult decisions regarding representation and advocacy objectives and the allocation of scarce resources.

The project relied on the participation of a broad spectrum of civil legal aid organizations and individuals. Guided by an advisory board consisting of legal aid providers and community members, the project sought information from community members through focus groups and a lengthy survey. Community members played a central role in this project, not just as focus group members or survey participants, but also by serving on the project advisory board, by helping structure and conduct the focus groups, and by playing a role in the creation, revision, and administration of the survey.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The project combined qualitative and quantitative data to identify barriers that prevent low-income DC residents from getting out of poverty. The qualitative data were collected through 20 focus groups convened by 15 different Consortium member organizations. In total, 130 community members participated in the focus groups. The quantitative data were gathered through a face-to-face survey. The data gathered in the focus groups informed the questions included in a quantitative survey instrument. This survey, which consisted of 14 broad categories of questions, was revised following the recommendations of the advisory board, community members, and subject matter experts. To ensure the reliability of the data collection effort, the project manager and principal investigator recruited and trained community members, law students, and volunteer attorneys to

follow standard field research procedures. Those selected to participate in the survey met DC residency and income requirements. The challenges associated with identifying, selecting, and persuading people to participate in this type of study made it important to include a large number of people. Ultimately, surveyors collected information from 590 people.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Types of Problems

The five problems that survey participants identified as most serious were housing, employment, neighborhood concerns, immigration, and debt. These and other issues that emerged from the study are described below in the same order in which they were listed in the survey and presented in the report.

Housing

Lack of adequate, affordable housing and anxiety about retaining housing emerged as pervasive concerns among survey participants. More than one-third of the survey participants considered problems related to housing to be the most serious problems they had experienced in the past 2 years, and when asked to identify the kind of help that people in their community most need, almost 40% of the survey participants said “housing.” The majority of survey participants reside in apartments or single-family homes, but 30% are homeless, and close to 60% of the survey participants worried about not having any housing

at all. Among renters, 43.3% experienced problems keeping up with rent increases and getting their landlords to make repairs. More than one in three did not feel they were living in a safe and secure place. Even when their housing arrangements were less than satisfactory, survey participants had difficulty finding safe, affordable housing, so that housing arrangements tended to be long term. Almost six out of ten survey participants reported that they had lived in their current places—including rental apartments in need of serious repair, homeless shelters, or outside—for more than 2 years.

Neighbors and Neighborhoods

Concerns about the quality of living conditions that surfaced in response to questions about housing also were reflected in the large number of survey participants whose most pressing problems involve the safety of their neighborhoods. Forty percent of survey participants said they had experienced some problems with their neighbors, and 46.6% had experienced problems in their neighborhoods, with crime, lack of city services, and uncertainty associated with redevelopment being the most common problems. Approximately 10% of all survey participants identified these problems as the most serious problems they had experienced in the past 2 years. Among survey participants, three out of ten indicated that they personally had been a victim of crime. Among those who had been a victim of crime, the majority of crimes involved property—theft, robbery, and break-ins. One in six had experienced gun violence.

Police

An issue that is closely related to how survey participants perceive their neighborhoods is their experience with the police. Survey participants who said they experienced problems with the police reported problems with their neighbors and their neighborhoods at a higher rate than those who did not. One in four survey participants reported problems with law enforcement, and 4.2% identified problems with the police as the most serious problems they had experienced in the past 2 years. Some people felt that police officers did not take their problems seriously. People who had problems with the police mentioned being stopped by the police without a good reason (27.8%) or being treated roughly by a police officer (15.9%). Among survey participants who are homeless and living outside, more than half reported that they had been stopped by the police without a good reason.

Transportation

Problems with transportation represent a particular hardship for low-income DC residents, and almost one third of the survey participants said they experienced these problems. Affordability was the biggest problem, followed by inconvenient bus or Metrorail scheduling, which presented a particular problem for people who work late hours. Survey participants who are working depend heavily on public transportation, so that affordability and dependability directly affect their ability to get to their jobs. Among those who owned vehicles (approximately one-fifth of the survey participants), the most frequent problems were paying for parking tickets and difficulty obtaining or renewing a driver's license.

Employment

Many survey participants are working, at least intermittently, but struggle to find and keep good jobs. When asked to identify the kind of help that people in their community most need, a quarter of the survey participants said "employment." When asked whether they had any problems related to employment, slightly less than half of the survey participants said yes, and 16.3% identified an employment-related problem as the biggest problem they had experienced in the past 2 years. Among those who identified an employment problem, not finding work was the most common problem (30.3%). Among survey participants who were homeless and living outside, 20% said that finding work was their biggest problem, bigger than housing. A large number of those who were unemployed said they had last worked more than 2 years ago. Despite the length of unemployment, few (5.8%) had given up looking for work.

A significant percentage of survey participants work full time (24.8%) or part time (16.5%), but full-time employment did not insulate survey participants from financial hardship. Almost 50 percent said they had difficulty paying bills, and less than 10 percent said they never had difficulty making ends meet. While 54.5% of those who were working full time received Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits (SNAP, formerly known as Food Stamps), almost half worried, at least occasionally, that they would not have enough food for their household.

Healthcare

DC has the second lowest rate of uninsured residents nationally, with 95% having health insurance. Among survey participants, the majority (75.7%) had some form of healthcare coverage. Among survey participants who are homeless and living outside,

the percentage dropped to 66.7%, while only 45.0% of survey participants with less than a ninth grade education had healthcare coverage. Some people without healthcare coverage expressed their perception that they did not qualify, that they could not afford it, or that applying for it would be time-consuming. Some believed their immigration status precluded them from having coverage.

Among those with healthcare coverage, most (66.3%) did not report any problems. Those who had problems expressed concerns about the cost and quality of coverage: 26.4% said their insurance did not cover certain items and services, 12.6% had difficulty signing up for healthcare, 11.3% could not obtain dental care they needed, and 10.7% could not get their prescriptions filled.

Income (Including public benefits)

The majority of survey participants lived in households that received some type of income from employment, public benefits, or both. Public benefits play an important role in the lives of the survey participants. More than half of the survey participants receive SNAP, including almost one-third of those who are working full or part time.

Approximately 18% of the survey participants said they had experienced problems when they applied for public benefits, the most common being long waits at the service center, inaccurate information provided by agency staff, and documents lost by the agency. Individuals who qualified for public benefits described problems with their benefits being miscalculated, denied, reduced, or stopped.

Debt

Almost half the survey participants reported some problem associated with debt, while almost two-thirds indicated that they occasionally or frequently had trouble “making ends meet.” The most common problems were calls from debt collectors, the threat of utilities being shut off, and being denied credit. Half said they occasionally or frequently felt uncertain about having enough food for their household. Many said they had skipped, delayed, or made partial payments on their rent, mortgage, or utilities.

Consumer

Among the 30% of survey participants who experienced consumer problems, by far the most common problems (80.1%) involved service or billing problems with phones, utilities, water, or cable. Only 1.2% of those who experienced consumer problems considered them to be their most serious problems.

Family and children

Approximately one-third of the survey participants indicated that they provided care for a child in the last 2 years, but among those survey participants, 70% said they had not experienced any problems with child custody or support. Survey participants who provided care for a child identified housing and employment as the most serious problems they face, with only a small percentage of survey participants (3.0%) naming problems with family and children as most serious. Among those who had problems, half reported disputes over the amount of child support received or paid. Child custody disputes centered on difficulty agreeing with the other parent about major decisions concerning the children and disagreements over visitation.

Family difficulties were not limited to problems between parents with children. Approximately 10% of the survey participants indicated that they had family problems that did not relate to their partner or child, including a family member stealing from them, family members overstaying their welcome, difficulty caring for a sick or elderly family member, and identity theft by a family member.

Domestic Violence

Approximately 16% of survey participants reported experiencing domestic violence in the last 2 years, including physical violence, threats of physical violence, and some other types of mistreatment (financial, emotional, or sexual abuse or overly controlling behavior). Among people who reported having experienced domestic violence, one in four identified it as their most serious problem. Fewer than half of the survey participants who experienced domestic violence had a child in their care, but among those who did, 61.9% had problems with child custody or child support.

Education

Because seven out of ten survey participants did not have children in their care, it is not surprising that only 11.8% of survey participants said they had experienced problems with education in the past 2 years. The most typical problems were enrolling in the school that the children wanted to attend, bullying in school, concerns about other school safety issues, poor teacher quality, and transportation.

Immigration

Although immigrants face many of the same problems that other low-income people experience, they often have additional problems related either to their immigration status or to language

access. Among all the survey participants, 20% indicated they were born in a country other than the United States, and more than half of these participants (57%) had experienced some problems related to immigration in the past 2 years. Among those who experienced problems with immigration, 65.5% identified issues related to immigration as their biggest problem. Immigrants also identified employment, housing, neighborhoods, and debt among their top five problems. Among the most frequently experienced problems related to immigration, lack of assistance in applying to legalize their immigration status topped the list. This concern is followed by the need for immigration counseling and difficulty applying for a driver's license, trouble at work because of national origin or immigration status, and insufficient assistance completing the necessary papers for family unification.

Collateral Consequences

The problems people experience spill into other areas of their lives, sometimes with serious collateral consequences. The most frequent consequences survey participants reported were becoming displaced from home, family-related problems such as breaking up with a partner, economic consequences, and worsening emotional and physical health. These consequences may limit an individual's ability and willingness to address problems.

How People Address Problems

Close to half of all survey participants said they took some steps to fix their most serious problem. Those who did not take any steps to address their most serious problems gave reasons for why they did not. Many of those survey participants expressed resignation about the problem, including a lack of confidence that they could solve it. Half of the survey participants who tried to resolve their most serious problem did so entirely on their own or with the help of family or a friend. Others received help from their families or friends, or turned to places of worship, community groups, or social workers or counselors for help. Some sought help from a government entity.

Perception of Legal Assistance

Of particular interest to the Consortium was whether or not people with low incomes are able to obtain legal help. Only 11.3% of the survey participants said they had tried to find a lawyer for help with a problem in the past 2 years (71.7% said they had not tried to find a lawyer, and 17.0% did not answer the question).

Among the relatively small group of survey participants (66 people) who had tried to find a lawyer, 59.6% were successful. Survey

participants most often consulted lawyers in housing, immigration, family, employment, and criminal cases. A few survey participants sought the assistance of a lawyer for cases involving medical malpractice, personal injury, or bankruptcy, or to have a will drafted. When people looked for a lawyer, they typically asked a friend for a referral, but others found a lawyer through a court-based resource center, a "know-your-rights" clinic, or a referral by a court, a social worker, the police, or medical personnel. Their first contact with a lawyer was ordinarily made in person or by telephone.

When survey participants were able to find a lawyer, the lawyer performed one or more of the following services: explained the law, made a call, filled out a form, drafted a letter, went to court, or negotiated with the other side. Forty-one survey participants had cases to be adjudicated, and the Superior Court of the District of Columbia was the most common legal venue, followed by the District of Columbia Housing Authority, the DC Office of Administrative Hearings, and the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia. The majority of those who sought but did not find a lawyer said that cost kept them from finding one. Perceived cost may have deterred others from even looking—eight out of ten people who answered the question agreed or strongly agreed that "lawyers are not affordable for people with low incomes." Among those who did find a lawyer, approximately two-thirds received free legal services.

The issue of cost is tied also to the perception of quality. Close to 60% of those who answered the question agreed or strongly agreed that "lawyers who will help you for free are not as good as lawyers who charge you." Even among participants who were assisted by a lawyer who did not charge, the percentage was the same.

At the same time, most survey participants who were able to find a lawyer, paid or free, felt positively about their lawyers. Three-quarters agreed or strongly agreed that their lawyers helped them understand their legal problems. A slightly higher percentage felt their lawyers treated them the way they wanted to be treated, and more than half expressed confidence in their lawyers.

Perception of the Justice System

When survey participants were asked about their beliefs in law and the justice system, the majority of those who responded (82.2%) agreed with the statement that "you should follow laws even when you believe it would be better not to." A similarly high percentage (80.9%) agreed that courts are "an important way for

ordinary people to enforce their rights,” but only two-thirds expressed confidence that they would receive a fair hearing if they went to court. More than half of the survey participants agreed that “people should resolve their problems within their family or community, not by using lawyers or the courts.”

Who Else Needs Help and What Kind

Survey participants were asked to identify who in their community needs help the most. Many people identified families with children, homeless people, and single men as needing help. When asked to specify the kind of help that people in their community need, almost 40% of the survey participants said “housing,” and almost 25% identified employment or employment training as a particular need.

Strengths of the Community

Focus group members identified many strengths in their community as well. Some of those strengths included the vibrancy of neighborhoods, the pride that people take in their homes, and the success that some community members experience. Focus group members expressed appreciation for service organizations—tenant associations, legal advocacy groups, labor organizations—that addressed shared problems. A sense of solidarity with other people in the same situation also gave some focus group members hope. This was particularly true for immigrants. Finally, many spoke of their faith and the support offered by their church or other place of worship.

CONCLUSION

This project does not prescribe any particular solutions, but serves as an invitation to legal services providers and community members to come together to think creatively, strategically, and inclusively about how to address these problems. The report concludes with a summary of key findings.

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