

A photograph of a man with a beard and short hair, wearing a dark grey long-sleeved shirt and light blue jeans, holding a young girl. The girl is wearing a pink and black patterned hoodie and pink leggings. They are standing on a concrete porch in front of a house with light-colored siding and a dark roof. A red semi-transparent box is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing the title and subtitle.

Measuring Resident Agency and Voice in an Affordable Housing Setting:

A Set of Guiding Questions to Move Forward

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Agency is key to economic mobility. Additionally, one's self-perceived agency can serve as a protective factor when facing adversarial circumstances. When a resident feels as if they have some control in addressing adversarial circumstances, this can mitigate how they experience stress. Agency also implies choice, which is directly tied to power and can serve as an indicator of racial equity, particularly if an institution's rules and practices aim to promote choice and agency of populations who have historically been oppressed, discounted, and ignored. These are just some of the many reasons why personal agency matters.

In affordable housing, resident agency is often perceived to be facilitated through surveys on resident needs and interests to design programs. In this context, resident engagement is quantified by program attendance and participation. However, limiting resident experience and input to surveys about programming is a missed opportunity to further build trust, demonstrate collaboration, or affirmatively further health and well-being.

Now more than ever – over two years into a global pandemic that has upended local economies, social norms, and a sense of control and well-being – the importance of creating genuine opportunities to return agency to affordable housing residents has never been more important. SAHF has produced several resources demonstrating how an affordable housing provider can take steps to include residents in property governance and operations. As practitioners move in the direction of taking steps to amplify resident voice and agency, the need to measure how such activities and changes have occurred will emerge. This guide aims to outline measures and data gathering practices that allow practitioners to do just that while also building off measures many housers are already gathering. Recommended measures roughly fall into four domains: resident satisfaction, social cohesion, resident power, and civic engagement. These domains were determined based on their prevalence as units of measurement throughout existing research and literature, as well as their relevance and applicability to the affordable housing industry.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This document is divided into four sections. Each section corresponds to a measurable concept thought to be critical to increased agency and voice. Each section begins with a short summary of some of the research findings outlining the connection between the concept and personal agency, followed by example questions a housing provider can ask internally to assess current efforts and stimulate discussion among staff to capture current and future activities.

Resident Satisfaction



Photocourtesy of BRIDGE Housing.

Many affordable housing providers already survey residents on how satisfied they are with different aspects of the property: amenities, safety, and customer service to name a few. Holleran Consulting, a private consulting firm focused on quality improvement in aging services delivery, posits that assessing resident satisfaction is a means to determine if customers' (e.g., residents') basic physiological needs and safety are being met, both of which are prerequisites for additional and deeper resident engagement. In other words, residents are unlikely to feel connected, fulfilled, and valued at a property – let alone encouraged to engage with property management – if they feel the property is unsafe, in poor condition, or does not take their concerns into consideration.

This concept is further supported by conversations with SAHF members who have noted the time and effort it can take to get residents to trust that their voice and opinions are valued – and acted upon – by property management. Hosting a forum or other space to get resident feedback and ideas on how to tackle a specific topic of community interest may take several tries before a significant number of residents participate and are engaged. As one SAHF member noted, “They have to trust that you are going to do what you say you will before they give you their time and effort.” Therefore, the act of measuring satisfaction and amending operations or physical aspects of the property as a result of feedback gathered is a great way to demonstrate that resident voices are vital to property function and culture.

1 Resident Satisfaction



When thinking about how your organization addresses resident satisfaction, below are some suggested questions to ask internally:

- » Does the organization routinely ask residents about their satisfaction with various aspects of the property and management? If so, what is the frequency?
- » How does the organization address any issues identified through a resident satisfaction survey? When an issue is addressed, how are changes and actions taken communicated to residents?
- » Does the organization offer a variety of ways residents can share feedback about the property in addition to a satisfaction survey, such as a suggestion box or hotline, etc.?
- » Have residents been asked about their preferred ways to share feedback?
- » How often do residents utilize the feedback channels offered?

When considering the types of questions to include in a resident satisfaction survey, below are some examples of the types of questions housing operators have utilized to determine resident satisfaction:

- » Overall, how satisfied are you with the following aspects of your property [using a 5-point or 10-point scale of satisfaction]:
 - Your apartment
 - Common areas
 - Outdoor spaces
 - Services and events
 - Upkeep and maintenance
 - Staff responsiveness
- » Right now, how likely are you to recommend this property to someone else as a good place to live? [using a 5-point scale of likelihood]
- » What is one thing you like best about living at this property? [open-ended]
- » What is one thing would you like to change about the property? [open-ended]
- » Property staff consistently deliver on their promises. [using a 5-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree]
- » Would you say the property has a positive reputation in the community? [yes/no]
- » How could the property improve its reputation? [open-ended]
- » How safe would you say you feel walking in the community near the property during the daytime? At night? [using a 5-point scale from very unsafe to very safe]

Social Cohesion



Photo courtesy of Homes for America.

Like resident satisfaction, social cohesion is a key factor in community building and increased resident engagement and participation, particularly for activities like volunteering. In a neighborhood or residential context, Grantmakers for Effective Organizations describes social cohesion as a “sense of connectedness among residents across communities”. Measuring this sense of connection can provide wider insights into a property’s culture, particularly around neighborliness and collaboration. Both neighborliness and collaboration play a vital role in a community’s capacity to create effective and lasting change through their relationships and actions – the ultimate outcome of exercising agency and voice in collaboration with others. Facilitating a sense of connection among residents takes time but there are ways housing providers and community organizers can help these bonds grow.

In 2016, the Center for the Study of Social Policy released a paper that aggregated lessons learned and effective strategies utilized over the 10-year course of Annie E. Casey Foundation’s Making Connections initiative. This initiative focused on improving the outcomes of kids in low-income neighborhoods across the United States through a primary strategy of supporting the voices and leadership development of participating families. The report highlighted that one of the best ways to engage residents was by holding social, cultural, or recreational activities. While community members initially came to these events because they offered a social outlet, the events became a place where residents could discuss community issues of importance and a vital mechanism for keeping families active and engaged in longer-term neighborhood improvement efforts.

2 Social Cohesion

The concept of social cohesion is important because individuals who do not feel a connection to their neighbors in a residential community are less inclined to participate in collective efforts to improve the community or provide input for improvements. Additionally, they may not feel comfortable speaking up about issues they see at the property or in the community if they are uncertain others share their concerns. Providing opportunities *and* the physical spaces for neighbors to connect can be beneficial to building social cohesion.

? When thinking about how your organization facilitates social cohesion among residents, below are some suggested questions to ask internally:

- » Does the organization routinely ask residents about how connected they feel to their neighbors?
- » What are some of the processes, activities, or property design elements that exist to encourage community-building exchanges between residents, from impromptu social gatherings to milestone celebrations among residents?
- » Does the organization ask residents for suggestions on how to increase neighborliness and/ or social connectedness at the property?

When considering the types of questions to you may want to ask residents to better understand how connected the feel to their neighbors, below are some examples of the types of questions housing operators have used:

- » Do you know your neighbors? [Most | Some | Few | None | Prefer not to say]
- » Can you rely on your neighbors? [Most | Some | Few | None | Prefer not to say]
- » How much do you feel that people in your community can count on each other when they need help? [using a 3- or 5-point scale of agreement]
- » The community or property provides me with opportunities to engage in helping others. [using a 5-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree]
- » Does the property have spaces where you and your neighbors can gather? [yes/no]
- » Which spaces are the best ones to use to get together with neighbors? What do you like about these spaces? [open-ended]
- » How can [organization/ housing owner or operator] help you feel more connected to your neighbors? To property staff? [open-ended]

Example from the Field

SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Now we'd like to ask you about the social aspects of living in the property.

Thinking about your relationships with people in your property, please indicate the degree to which you feel each of the following statements describes you.

	Very much	Somewhat	Not at all
If I need support, I know who I can call on.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have people I feel close to.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I know there are people who really understand me.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I feel part of a group of friends.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

The following is a list of ways in which neighbors sometimes interact with each other. Please indicate how often neighbors in this property do each of them.

	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Don't Know
Stop to talk when they see each other.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Watch sports or other entertainment together.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Prepare or share a meal.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Watch their children or grandchildren together.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Have a neighbor over to talk.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Call or text a neighbor.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Source: [Enterprise Healthy Outcomes Survey](#)

Resident Power



As mentioned in the previous section, a community’s capacity to create effective and lasting change through their relationships and actions is the ultimate outcome of exercising agency and voice in collaboration with others. This is the pinnacle of collective resident power. As outlined by the authors of the Center for the Study of Social Policy’s report *Fostering Resident Voice and Community Change*: “what is sought by prioritizing resident leadership is a shift in influence and power.” Furthermore, researchers at Urban Institute have found that to truly support people’s well-being and success and address decades of unequal access to economic opportunity in low-income neighborhoods, organizations working in these neighborhoods must also support a shift in influence and power to residents.

Among housing providers, the shift to incorporating resident voice and providing residents a seat at decision-making tables can take on many phases. For some, the shift can start with the task of obtaining resident input on what a property remodel or retrofit could look like. For others, engaging with residents is central to determining how housing operations and service delivery can be transformed to be more trauma-informed. Whatever incorporating resident voice looks like, it means making sure that you are reaching out, including, and acting upon the perspectives of more than the most active residents or self-appointed community representatives, but also the perspectives of newer residents, young people, and others who might bring a different point of view.

3 Resident Power



How a housing operator engages with residents will determine how the organization can measure changes in resident power and existing opportunities for residents to exercise leadership. When thinking about how your organization encourages and amplifies resident voice and leadership, below are some suggested questions to ask internally:

- » What opportunities for power sharing are provided to residents? Have the number and quality of opportunities changed over time?
- » What are the barriers to increasing the opportunities for residents to have more of a say in property operations and culture? How can the organization address these barriers?
- » Are residents engaged in participatory planning and goal setting for the property? How are they engaged as strategists in these efforts?
- » How are residents engaged in gathering data and information to improve services and operations? Do they have a say in what data is gathered and how success is determined?

When considering the types of questions to ask or data you may want to collect to measure shifts in resident voice and leadership, below are some examples of the types of questions housing operators have used/ can use:

- » I can influence what happens at this property. [survey question using a 5-point scale to measure agreement]
- » Asking residents what success looks like regarding a service program, operational change, new initiative, or strategy, etc. [open-ended survey, focus group, or community meeting question]
- » Tracking the number of residents in decision-making roles at the property
- » Tracking the number of residents engaged in decision-making, strategy implementation, and quality improvement for data collection, services, or operations
- » Asking residents who have participated in leadership roles or strategy implementation what can the organization do to improve organizational efforts to incorporate and act upon given input [open-ended survey, focus group, or community meeting question]
- » Documenting organizational or operational changes made as a result of resident leadership and input

Civic Engagement



Civic engagement activities, such as volunteering, attending public hearings, and voting, have long served as indicators of community participation. Many organizations, such as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, view civic engagement as fundamental to a thriving community; increased voter participation and volunteerism are often interpreted as signs that individuals “feel empowered to take action, are engaged with decision-making, and want to influence change.”

For the purposes of this guide, which focuses on data housing operators could collect and steps they can take to better understand how property operations and activities amplify or hinder resident voice and agency, civic engagement is defined as external – meaning outside of the property or housing community – activities where residents exercise choice and power. This distinction was made with the understanding that it may be more difficult for housing providers to gather information on resident leadership activities and behaviors outside the property.

? When thinking about how your organization supports resident participation in civic engagement activities in the wider community, below are some suggested questions to ask internally:

- » Does the organization provide nonpartisan information or opportunities for residents to connect with elected officials or candidates running for office?
- » What organizations in the community offer educational and civic engagement resources to share with residents? Would it make sense to connect residents to these organizations?

4 Civic Engagement

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- » Does the organization provide voter registration information or partner with other organizations in the community that conduct voter registration drives or provide information on how to register?
-
- » Does the organization or its resident services partners offer community organizing or resident leadership skill-building activities? How might your organization facilitate a connection between residents and nonpartisan community partners who offer these types of services?
-

When considering the types of questions to ask or data you may want to collect to measure residents' civic engagement, below are some examples of questions and data points housing operators have used/ can use:

- » Are you registered to vote?
 - Yes, I am registered
 - No, I am not registered
 - I am not eligible to vote
 - Prefer not to say
- » Did you vote in the last election?
 - Yes, Presidential/National
 - Yes, Local (County, City, District, etc.)
 - No
 - I am not eligible to vote
 - Prefer not to say
- » Have you volunteered in the community in the last 12 months? [yes/ no]
- » In the last 12 months, have you contacted an elected official to let them know your views and concerns? [yes/ no]
- » In the last 12 months, have you attended a public hearing to learn more about an issue or express your views or concerns? [yes/ no]
- » Tracking the number of residents participating on boards or other decision-making bodies in the community
- » Tracking the number of residents who run for public office
- » Documenting advocacy training or community organizing opportunities provided to residents
- » Tracking any community issues addressed or policies enacted as a result of resident engagement and advocacy

In Conclusion

From the history of redlining to the invasive processes required for income recertification, the various systems that have influence over who has access to which housing and when have a long way to go to right the wrongs from the past. Understanding the need and responsibility to address old and racially unjust practices, some affordable housing providers are working to amplify resident voice, figure out how housing operations can be transformed to be more person-centered, and share decision-making responsibilities with residents. Such changes cannot occur without resident input, organizational buy-in and transparency, and a willingness and responsibility to investigate how your organization does and does not encourage and amplify resident voice and leadership. As a result, SAHF has developed this resource to offer guiding questions organizations can ask both themselves and the residents they serve how to do better and truly make progress supporting resident agency. As the field evolves, so will the questions asked, and the benchmarks measured. This guide is just a start. SAHF looks forward to documenting and learning with our members, peers, and others as we continue along this journey.

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ABOUT SAHF

Stewards of Affordable Housing for the Future (SAHF) is a nonprofit collaborative of 12 exemplary multi-state nonprofit affordable housing providers. Launched in 2003, SAHF and its members are driven by a shared mission of advancing the creation and preservation of healthy, sustainable, affordable homes that foster equity, opportunity, and wellness for residents. SAHF draws on the experience of its members' portfolio of more than 149,000 affordable rental homes to inform its policy and thought leadership work.