



CENTERING RESIDENTS IN BUILDING DECISIONS

A PROVIDER'S EXPERIENCE

Deepening resident engagement during a building upgrade can deliver lasting impacts for both residents and owners.

Community Housing Partners (CHP) is an affordable housing provider based in Virginia with a portfolio of 6,492 units in 108 communities throughout the Mid-Atlantic and Southeast Regions. Constructed in three phases from 1998 to 2004, Cedar Crest Apartments includes 78 townhomes in Blacksburg, VA. Cedar Crest is subsidized by the 9% Low-Income Housing Tax Credit Program and serves Blacksburg families. In 2018, CHP weatherized the property and incorporated high efficiency heat pump systems for heating and cooling. However, given the property's age, significant renovations were still needed. In 2020, CHP started a resident-driven major rehabilitation process to further its mission of elevating residents' voice and well-being in all aspects of its affordable housing work.

A SAHF Framework for Resident Benefits

Stewards of Affordable Housing for the Future (SAHF) has studied the relationship between different building upgrades and benefits that flow to residents. SAHF developed a **resident benefits framework** to help housing providers:

- Maximize Resident Benefit within the Bounds of Cost-Effectiveness
- Prioritize Measures that Have No Natural Life Cycle
- Encourage Resident-Led Upgrades and Beneficial Use of Systems

CHP applied this framework to conscientiously incorporate resident benefits in the decision-making process for building upgrades.

Center Residents in Survey Design

CHP wanted residents' feedback on their experience of the existing building design and recommendations for potential in-unit and community-level improvements. SAHF worked with CHP to design an online resident survey. To encourage participation and solicit meaningful feedback, key considerations for survey design included:

- Easy-to-understand questions focused on residents' level of satisfaction with existing energy systems or apartment features
- Ask questions related to systems or features that could feasibly be included in the scope of the rehabilitation. Avoid references to measures that you cannot feasibly improve.
- Open-ended questions that allow for new considerations and deeper understanding

The online format was appropriate in light of COVID-19 precautions in fall 2020. The **survey results** are readily available for residents and staff.

CASE STUDY 2021



CEDAR CREST APARTMENTS

A COMMUNITY HOUSING PARTNERS COMMUNITY

Location: Blacksburg, VA

Year Built: 1998-2004

- 78 townhomes
- Resident-paid electric utilities
- Owner-paid water utilities

Funding Source: \$1.6 million from Virginia Housing

Scope of Work

- **Building Shell:** Doors
- **Hot Water:** High-Efficiency Electric Water Heater
- **Lighting:** In-Unit and Exterior LED Lighting*
- **Ventilation:** Kitchen and Restroom Exhaust Fans
- **Appliances:** Refrigerators*, Dishwasher, Countertop Microwaves, Garbage Disposals, and Ceramic Top Stoves
- **Water:** Faucets, Aerators, and High-Efficiency Toilets
- **Other:** Cabinets with Additional Storage*, Refurbished Decks*, Outdoor Playground*, ADA Accessibility Upgrades*

*Measures influenced by residents are in light blue

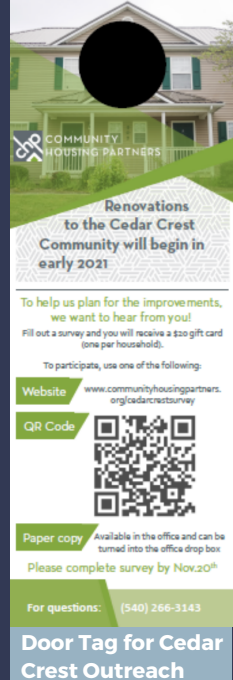
Act on Resident Feedback

The survey was successful in collecting resident input on specific measures within the planned rehabilitation scope where it would be feasible to make design changes. The results led to changes in specific products and appliances that aligned with feedback and also stayed in budget. For example, residents' responses led to larger refrigerators as well as wider and deeper bathroom vanities. On community facilities, the survey also revealed that a majority of respondents would be interested in a community garden, and that the most sought-after additional facility was a fitness area for teens and adults. The survey also provided an opportunity for residents to indicate what kinds of support they would need to allow for a rehabilitation to take place during the pandemic. Resident responses informed how CHP phased the rehabilitation process to minimize resident disruption.

THE COMPONENTS OF A RESIDENT-CENTERED PROCESS

Deep resident engagement is a shift from housing providers telling residents what will be implemented in a building upgrade to providers creating intentional ways to involve and collaborate with residents. This enables residents to be valued partners in the decisions that impact their homes and to deepen their understanding of new systems and the benefits available to them. It can also be an opportunity to create homes that better meet residents' needs and to refine existing decision-making processes for future projects. CHP's process is documented below:

- **Dedicated Staff** - From the start, CHP made the decision to allocate significant staff time for deep resident engagement prior to having funding on hand. The project was designed as an integrated effort involving its asset management, property management, and corporate development teams.
- **Early Expectation Setting** - The secured financing set boundaries on what CHP could realistically do as the housing provider, but CHP also included some flexibility in its survey and communications to allow for new considerations.
- **Resident-centered Survey** - Once the financing was secured, survey questions were designed to solicit meaningful feedback on existing systems and features in all residential units from the population served (working families). CHP also determined how best to compensate residents who took time out of their busy lives to provide valuable feedback.
- **Multiple Methods to Give Feedback** - In addition to the online survey, CHP provided residents with multiple ways to participate in the process through phone survey, printed survey, and in-person appointments.
- **Increased Transparency** - CHP created a website for residents to learn more about more about the renovations, view renderings and a model unit, and submit additional questions. Staff also used door tags, virtual and in-person unit tours, and in-person visits to keep residents up-to-date, follow up on responses, and address any new issues.



RESIDENT EXPERIENCE

"I feel like the renovation process was fast, and they did a good job. I do like everything, especially the kitchen because I am a cook. I have more space with the cabinets, and I enjoy the countertops and the new floor. The renovations came out really nice. Everything worked out in a timely fashion. The staff let me know they would be coming, and I was able to get ready in time. It looks nice, and I like it!"

-Bernell P., Cedar Crest resident for two years

For more photos from the Cedar Crest renovation, please visit **Community Housing Partners' website.**



KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM COVID-19

The pandemic presented an opportunity to learn how to implement sensitive community engagement and rehabilitation practices. CHP will carry these implementation lessons forward to future projects:

Start the Process Early

CHP's resident engagement started after they secured financing for the renovation. Being further along in the planning process limited the scope of work. For future projects, CHP will engage residents at the start of the process, so they may secure funds to act on other resident considerations (e.g., community spaces).

Create More Spaces for Community Dialogue

Due to the pandemic, CHP relied heavily on surveys and other socially-distanced communication methods. This multi-channel approach resulted in responses from nearly **50% of Cedar Crest households**. Although CHP compensated residents for their involvement, there was still the other 50% they did not hear from. CHP plans to dedicate more staff time to focus groups (virtual and in person) and door-to-door outreach as well as utilizing more open-ended questions to gain greater insight into what residents would like to see in their community.

Meet Residents Where They Are

To be responsive to residents' needs, CHP limited rehab work to a maximum of two units at a time. Although the team prepared buildings and hospitality rooms with internet and other amenities, most residents preferred to stay in their homes during construction. Being sensitive to resident needs meant managing expectations as a staff member. Ongoing communications and flexibility from a trusted staff member like a property manager contributed to positive feedback from most residents. Negative feedback may have been avoided and other alternatives developed through earlier communications.



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