



County of Sonoma

# Exploring Rental Protections: Summary of Community Engagement Findings

Prepared by MIG, Inc.

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## Introduction

In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors passed Urgency Ordinance 6337, referred to as “Just Cause,” to provide an additional layer of housing protections during the emergency. These expired in September of 2022.

In the spring of 2024, the County engaged MIG, Inc. to conduct outreach and engagement with community members, tenants, and housing providers as it explores housing issues impacting unincorporated areas of the County. This report includes findings from this community engagement process and will be presented to the Board of Supervisors to contribute to the overall understanding of housing issues and attitudes towards housing protections in Sonoma County.

MIG engaged with tenants, housing providers, and advocates through a series of key informant interviews and focus groups. This engagement yielded qualitative data on attitudes, opinions, and ideas about housing protections in Sonoma County.

## Key Themes

The major themes addressed by stakeholders and community members are summarized below.

### **Perceptions of current housing issues and the relationships between tenants and landlords vary widely.**

Housing providers described generally positive relationships with tenants and minimal existing issues, beyond lack of affordability. Housing providers described a strong desire to keep good tenants, keep safe and well-maintained units, and see a positive return on investment. Tenants and social service providers often described housing units in poor condition, drastic rent increases, and fear of retaliation by landlords. Additionally, several tenants described positive relationships with landlords, noting that they had found housing through their personal network. All respondents agreed that lack of affordable housing is a big problem in Sonoma County.

## **Vulnerable populations face significant additional barriers to finding, obtaining, and keeping safe, affordable housing.**

Populations such as low-income renters, people of color, immigrants, people with limited English proficiency, people experiencing homelessness or who were formerly homeless, people with mental health or medical issues, seniors, and students face additional barriers to accessing affordable, safe housing for a variety of reasons. Barriers included lack of affordable options; undocumented status; lack of paperwork required to obtain a rental; high costs of rent, fees, and living expenses; apparent discrimination; difficulty in accessing information about, understanding and navigating application processes; and lack of recourse in the case of sudden rent raises, habitability issues or eviction.

## **Housing advocates urge policy makers to implement additional housing protections to prevent abuses and protect the most vulnerable populations.**

Housing advocates described serious problems with abuses of tenants, particularly of vulnerable populations, in rental housing. These included very poor living conditions, drastic rent hikes, evasion of just cause regulations, and intimidation. They urged policy makers to implement additional housing protections, such as just cause protections, rent stabilization, rent registry, and protection for organizing tenants unions.

## **Housing providers warn that additional regulation may lead to unintended consequences.**

Housing providers and some social service providers voiced concern that increased rental regulations and protections would fail to help either owners or renters and lead to negative unintended consequences, such as creating adverse relationships between tenants and landlords, creating too much risk for housing providers, making it too difficult for housing providers to make a profit, and ultimately leading to housing providers exiting the market and decreasing the rental housing supply.

## **More social and financial support is needed for renters, and better education on protections and renters' rights needed for all.**

Housing providers and social service providers suggested that rental assistance would help tenants stay in their homes and avoid eviction. Social service and affordable housing providers noted that regulations governing who receives assistance are convoluted and sometimes counter-intuitive, making it difficult for tenants to actually access support. More funding, with clearer regulations, is needed to enable programs to assist renters and provide affordable housing. Better collection and use of data is needed to inform a realistic assessment of housing needs. Tenants, property owners, elected officials and other decision-makers need additional education to understand options for rental protections and rights.

## Approach

### Interviews

MIG conducted eight virtual key stakeholder interviews of up to one hour in duration. The purpose of these interviews was to engage key internal and external stakeholders with knowledge and understanding of rental conditions in unincorporated Sonoma County to better understand key topics, challenges, and audiences.

Working from a list of stakeholder organizations provided by the County, MIG reached out to a variety of community-based organizations, housing providers, and tenant advocates with invitations for an interview. The following is a list of those organizations approached for interviews

Organization	Description	Interview
La Plaza/Nuestra Cultura CURA Project	Latine-created and directed healing program	March 26, 2024, 9-10 a.m. <i>Interviewed:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Denisse Madrigal, Program Manager</li><li>• Lizette Claudia Vergara, Disaster Recovery Manager</li><li>• Vanesa Valdiva, Disaster Response Manager</li></ul>
Sonoma County COAD (Community Organizations Active in Disaster) / Legal Aid of Sonoma County	Coordinated network of organization providing disaster support and legal aid	March 27, 11-12 a.m. <i>Interviewed:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Jeanette Pantoja, Director, COAD</li><li>• Kendall Jarvis, Lead Attorney, Legal Aid of Sonoma County</li><li>• Margaret DeMatteo, Housing Policy Attorney, Legal Aid of Sonoma County</li><li>• Gabriela Orantes, Just Recovery Partnership Manager, North Bay Organizing Project</li></ul>
Face2Face	Services for individuals living with HIV, including housing assistance	March 27, 1:30-2:30 p.m. <i>Interviewed:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sara Brewer, Executive Director</li><li>• Monica Morales, Care Services Coordinator</li><li>• Greg Fairbrother, Case Manager</li><li>• Cristal Garcia, Case Manager</li></ul>
NAACP Santa Rosa - Sonoma County Branch	Civil rights organization	March 28, 1:30-2:30 p.m. <i>Interviewed:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Kirstyne Lange, President</li></ul>

Organization	Description	Interview
Burbank Housing	Affordable housing provider	April 17, 1-2 p.m. <i>Interviewed:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lauren Taylor, Director of Resident Services</li> <li>• Jessica Hughes, Resident Services Manager</li> <li>• Jacob Rich, Resident Services Manager</li> </ul>
Petaluma People Services Center	Human services programs, including Aging Well Together for seniors, Homeless Prevention and Fair Housing	April 17, 4:30-5:30 p.m. <i>Interviewed:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Elece Hempel, Executive Director</li> </ul>
Teachers, unaffiliated	Teachers	April 18, 2024, 4 p.m. and April 23, 2024, 5 p.m. – Online via Zoom
Generation Housing	Housing advocacy in Sonoma County	<i>No response to invitation</i>
Catholic Charities	Human service agency	<i>No response to invitation</i>
Centro Laboral de Graton (ALMAS program)	Worker-led day labor center	<i>No response to invitation</i>
Council on Aging	Senior services	<i>Provided alternative recommendation</i>
Fair Housing Advocates of Northern Sonoma County	Housing advocates	<i>No response to invitation</i>
Homeless Action Sonoma	Non-profit housing advocate / provider	<i>No response to invitation</i>
La Familia Sana	Grassroots assistance for underserved community members	<i>No response to invitation</i>
Latino Service Providers (LSP)	Access to resources and services for Latinx community	<i>No response to invitation</i>

Interview questions were designed to elicit information, attitudes, and insights from interviewees on housing issues and housing protections in Sonoma County. The interviews served to inform the approach to and questions asked during the focus groups.

## Focus Groups

Focus groups were used to further probe community attitudes and insights on housing issues and housing protections. Affinity groups were used to create a space for participants to share freely and to hear from members of groups that may be impacted differently by housing issues and housing protections. Accessibility was ensured by holding a mix of in-person and virtual and English and Spanish-language focus groups to accommodate for the needs and preferences of each group.

The following focus groups were held:

<b>Affinity</b>	<b>Date / Format and Location</b>	<b>Number of Participants</b>
Realtors, Property-owners, and Property-management	April 3, 2024, 9 a.m. – Online via Zoom	6
Spanish-speaking renters in the Guerneville area	April 8, 2024, 8 p.m. – in-person at Fife Creek Commons	12
Spanish-speaking renters in Roseland area	April 10, 2024, 12 p.m. – in-person at Bayer Park and Gardens	12
Students at Sonoma State University and Santa Rosa Junior College	April 10, 2024, 6:15 p.m. – Online via Zoom	8
Rental housing providers (landlords and property managers)	April 11, 2024, 1 p.m. – Online via Zoom	10
Spanish-speaking renters in The Springs area	April 17, 2024, 8 p.m. – in-person at Sonoma United Methodist Church	12
Bilingual focus group with tenant leaders from the North Bay Organizing Project	April 26, 2024, 7 p.m. – Online via Zoom	5
Spanish-speaking renters in Cloverdale	April 29, 2024, 5 p.m. – in-person in Cloverdale	9

## Findings on Politics and Policy

Stakeholders, leaders, and community members provided perspectives on the affordable housing supply in Sonoma, the risks undertaken by housing providers, and how both are affected by the political landscape and housing policy. Their comments addressed the following themes:

### Barriers in Finding and Retaining Rental Housing Faced by Vulnerable Populations

- Key groups facing greater barriers to finding rental housing include low-income renters, people of color, immigrants / Limited English Proficient individuals, homeless or formerly homeless, those receiving assistance with mental health or medical issues, seniors, and students. Many of these vulnerable populations are more likely to be housed in unincorporated areas of the

County. Many advocates and service providers for these residents urge greater protections, particularly just cause and rent control.

- Historic discriminatory and exclusionary practices keep people of color and low-income communities in unincorporated areas, contribute to displacement and lack of housing and contribute to barriers to access to services.
- People of color are disproportionately impacted by homelessness and eviction.
- Overcrowding and poor living conditions are impacting many renters, especially those who are more vulnerable to eviction, such as those who are low-income, do not speak English, are not listed on a lease, or who are undocumented.
- Those who did not have a lease or contract when moving in, are sharing without legal lease or found through casual circumstances, and/or have no proof of income or rent payments, cannot seek legal support.

### Concern about Unintended Consequences of Protections

- Housing providers and some tenant advocates voiced concern that increased rental regulations have the unintended consequence of reducing the rental housing supply by raising owners' costs and limiting the rate of return, leading to many taking their property out of the rental market. The multiplicity and complexity of regulations is also challenging. Supporting greater protections such as a rent registry are costly to the County without improving circumstances.
- It was also noted that some owners will raise the rent while they can when they hear that new protections are being enacted or even considered.
- Most new rental housing developments are in A-class, market-rate rental units. The cost of building entry-level rental properties makes it unattractive to developers.
- It has been suggested that regulatory needs may vary between types of housing providers. Large-scale owners or property management companies are more able to take advantage of loopholes in the law while smaller or mom-and-pop housing providers are adversely limited in their options or ability to make a fair rate of return.
- Some tenant advocates promote additional protections in support of vulnerable tenants. Others feel that over-regulation sets up an adverse relationship between housing providers and tenants and urge the development of relationships, facilitation of neutral mediation and negotiation between the two.

### Limitations in Available Funding and Support

- There are limitations in terms of funding, supports, and assistance that can be offered. Available funding often falls short of what is needed. Some agencies are restricted by their funding as to who they can and cannot assist (e.g., people who are undocumented, residents in unincorporated areas who cannot be represented by a municipality, etc.). Programs often receive funding from multiple streams with conflicting requirements or qualifications.
- It can be difficult to help many receiving services to locate housing. Organizations that do not have direct access to housing options must work with other agencies that may not be accessible or sufficiently responsive. Sometimes it is not possible to access the needed resources, either because they do not exist or the process cannot be accomplished during limited time available.

- The primary factor for entry into homelessness is inability to afford rent. Vouchers do not cover enough of the cost of rent – makes it difficult to transition from homeless to housed.
- Waitlists for affordable housing are too long, so many people do not even bother to sign up.
- Exemptions in existing housing protections, such as housing that receives state, federal or local municipality funding and therefore does not have to follow mandated rent stabilization, creates gaps in housing protection.

### Difference in Perception of Current Issues and Potential Policy Solutions

- Housing providers described generally positive relationships with tenants, a desire to provide high quality housing, and resistance to new housing protections, which they said would lead to unintended consequences including fewer units on the market and increased rents. Tenant advocates and tenants in vulnerable living situations described precarious arrangements with few protections and high vulnerability to abuse. Both housing providers and tenant advocates were critical of “bad actor” landlords who committed abuses. Tenants with more resources, such as higher incomes and a strong personal network that includes housing providers, described generally positive experiences with rental housing. This is consistent with the finding that people with fewer resources and more structural vulnerability (e.g. lower incomes, health issues or disabilities, undocumented, etc.) are bearing the brunt of serious housing problems.
- There is a lack of data being collected and/or used to reflect the true need for rental housing, particularly for vulnerable populations. New data needs to be compiled to assess the results of discontinuing pandemic-era protections, only truly visible in the past year. Data is also missing due to lack of reporting on the part of members of these vulnerable populations. For instance, violations are not reported because renters are afraid of losing their place to live or jeopardizing their immigration status; or seniors who are homeless going to great lengths to hide their status because they do want to be placed in shelter or an affordable housing complex.
- Some residents choose to “self-evict” by leaving upon receiving notice because they are not aware of their rights or are afraid of the consequences, such as impacting their immigration status. This may in turn add to inaccurate data regarding the frequency and cause of evictions.

### Economic and Climate Impacts

- The difficulty of finding and retaining affordable rentals in the County has adverse economic and climate impacts:
  - Many businesses have difficulty finding enough workers long-term. It is particularly difficult for farmworkers, who play a vital role in the local economy, to find housing or receive assistance or support.
  - Inability to find housing in the county, having to leave the county to find housing, or self-eviction contributes to homelessness and/or environmental impacts due to the need for a long commute.

### Outreach to Renters

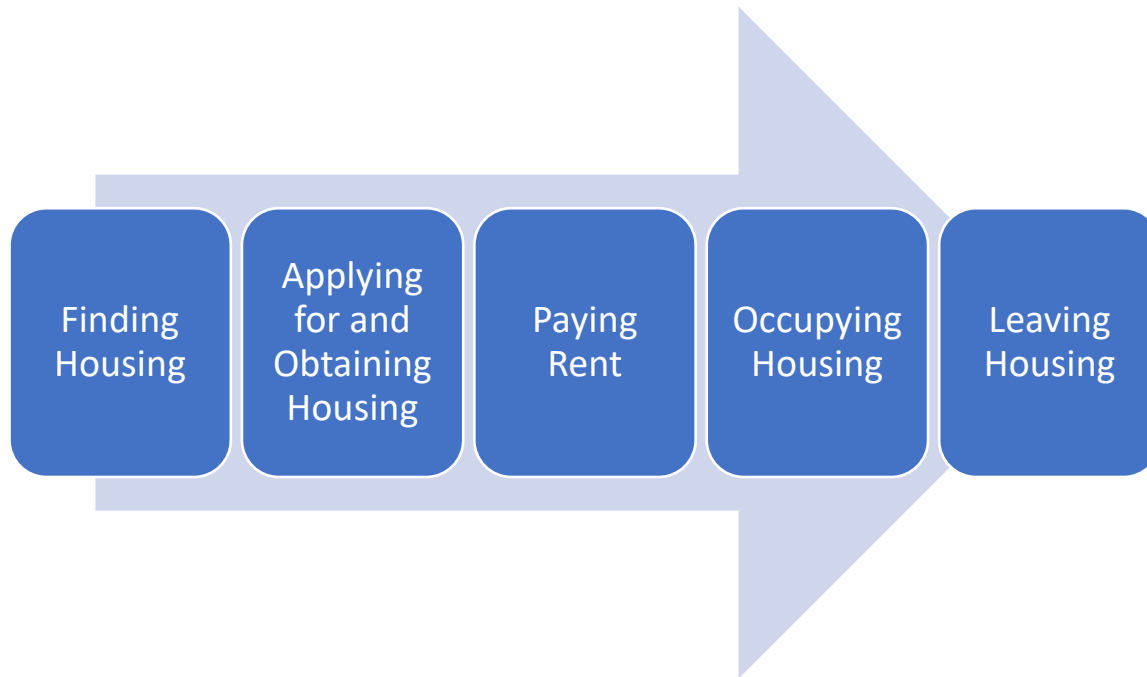
- Stakeholders suggested various questions to ask renters regarding their experience of renting in Sonoma County. These included fear of being evicted, excessive rent increases, familiarity with their rights as a renter, ability to find housing near their job, and whether they feel safe asking

their landlord for repairs. There is a need to learn what renters are actually experiencing and where their greatest struggles.

- It was also suggested that outreach events be made more accessible by holding them in safe, trusted, and comfortable venues, and offering food and childcare.

## Findings on the Rental Process

Findings on rental housing in Sonoma County are organized by the stages of the rental housing process, to demonstrate the junctures where housing issues arise.



## Finding Housing

### Housing Supply in Context

- **Risk to Housing Providers.** As discussed previously, rising costs of owning and maintaining rental properties and difficulty in navigating increased regulation are making it more difficult for property owners, particularly mom-and-pop or small-scale landlords, to remain in the business of providing rentals.
- **Lack of affordable rental housing.** There is a lack of affordable rental housing. Most new housing that is built is market-rate. Many who would like to buy a home cannot afford to do so, sharpening the competition for available rentals. Many who are employed in the county, including teachers and low-income workers, cannot afford to live there, creating a long commute.
  - **Generational transfer.** Rental properties that are inherited often are taken off the market, either for the owner to move in, or to be sold to a buyer who will live in rather than offer it for rent.



- **Shortage of housing for families.** There is a shortage of housing for families, particularly for multi-generational families. Older residents with large rentals or owning larger houses that could house families cannot afford to downsize, so those larger properties can't be made available to families.
- **Lack of Diverse Options in Housing.** Decision-makers are not considering building all types of housing that are needed; they often lack data to clarify what actual needs exist.

## Searching for Rentals

- **Limited availability.** All participants stated that affordable rental housing options are limited, and that there is a lot of competition for available rental housing. It can be particularly difficult to find affordable housing in unincorporated areas.
  - Funding and assistance such as vouchers and subsidies is not sufficient to meet the full cost of rentals, even though classed as "affordable." Changes in laws governing qualifications for assistance can reduce this amount even further (e.g., seniors with HIV who no longer qualify for SSDI since it is no longer considered a chronic condition).
  - The prevalence of short-term rentals is one factor reducing the supply.
- **Search methods.** A variety of alternatives exist for finding rentals, including agencies, social media, listing services such as Zillow, bulletin boards, and for a few fortunate renters, the ability to find options through personal or professional connections and word of mouth.
- **Difficulties for vulnerable populations**
  - Those who qualify for affordable housing or who receive assistance from community-based organizations or agencies are handicapped by the lack of a single coordinated access point for finding housing or getting information on how to find and secure housing.
  - Participants in the Spanish-speaking focus groups reported using agencies that charge up to \$100 per person for taking applications which are valid for six months, and sometimes do not actually offer any help. Some have experienced apparent racism from these agencies.
  - Some Spanish-speaking renters are only able to find a place to rent through working for apartment complexes as gardeners or construction workers.
  - Students stated that it can be very difficult and competitive to find rental options off campus, and that some local colleges could do more to help their students find housing.
  - Many reported struggling to find places that accept children and/or pets.

## Applying for and Obtaining Housing

### Application and Qualification Process

Many participants in interviews and focus groups described barriers related to the process of applying and qualifying for rental housing:

- **Lack of Documentation.** Inability to provide required documentation such as social security, bank accounts and/or proof of income, or a credit score, is a barrier for many, especially for immigrants who may be undocumented, for the homeless or formerly homeless or incarcerated,

and students. This affects a wide variety of ethnic groups. Proof of sustained income can be particularly challenging for seasonal workers or those who are paid “under the table” or in cash.

- Students described needing to find a co-signer (parents or older siblings) to be accepted. Some may have no one to co-sign (e.g., they lack family relationships, or family members are also undocumented immigrants).
- Farmworkers and seasonal workers are heavily impacted because they do not have a consistent income stream in the off season and it is difficult to carve out savings during the peak season.
- **Lack of Knowledge / Support.** Challenges faced by immigrants, particularly those who are recently arrived, here through asylum, and/or are undocumented, include:
  - Difficulties understanding leases and other legal requirements due to lack of experience (things work differently in their original country; they may have lived in a house they built themselves, or may not be used to city life), language barriers, or education level.
  - They don’t know how to ask for support or find connections; are not given the right tools to find help, and/or may lack technical ability or accessibility.
  - They don’t want to rock the boat, especially if waiting for documentation.
- **High Fees.** High application fees are often charged, sometimes per person when there are multiple renters, and are not refundable. There are some reports of these being done even when the place has already been rented. Applications often expire within 6 months. High per-person fees are also sometimes charged for attending open houses.
- **Deposits.** Deposits can be very high, sometimes up to 3 times the cost of rent \$3000 - \$5000. They can be difficult to afford, especially with additional fees, rent increases and the high cost of living in general. Lower-income tenants have difficulty meeting all expenses. One participant reported that their landlord required them to maintain \$7,000 in their bank account each month, and as a result this individual had to borrow and withdraw \$7,000 each month.
- **Discrimination.** Apparent discrimination against or unwillingness to rent have been experienced by Spanish-speakers, low-income individuals including those with rental vouchers, recipients of public services, the formerly homeless or incarcerated, those with pets and/or children, and students. Some have limitations or charge higher rates for those with pets and/or children. Some housing programs have a preference for certain income levels.

## Paying Rent

### Contract Issues

- **Leases.**
  - Those with shorter-term leases, particularly renting from larger property management companies, such as students with monthly agreements, can be subject to sudden changes or rent raises without much recourse.
  - Many low-income renters do not have a lease – some agencies see a minority of immigrants who do so. They may be sharing with another family or in another irregular situation and are not protected under current laws.

## Rent and Fees

- **Rent Increases and Disputes.** Since the pandemic and rent moratoriums ended, renters, including participants in Spanish-speaking, students and tenant union focus groups, have experienced significant rent increases, sometimes frequently and/or without sufficient notice. Some properties will raise the rent if one person on a multiple-tenant lease moves out, or if ownership changes; there are reports of landlords that re-incorporate frequently in order to raise rents and fees. These increases can be made without being accompanied by significant improvements.
  - Space rent in mobile home parks has increased to up to \$1,500 to \$2,100 according to focus group participants. Residents are stuck paying because they own their mobile home and it is not feasible to move it.
  - The rent charged is sometimes higher than what was advertised.
  - It can be a challenge to get in touch with landlords or agencies regarding rent disputes. Many experience fears about rising rent leading to potential legal issues.
  - Seniors are particularly impacted by rent raises which sometimes take place in advance of social security increases. There may not be enough funding to bridge the gap, which leads to hard decisions between expenses (e.g., rent or food).
  - Participants in the Cloverdale focus group reported that rents had increased significantly in the aftermath of the fires.
  - There were many reports of overcrowding, which is due to the high cost of rent, but had a double negative impact on quality of life and increased vulnerability to abuses by landlords or eviction due to lease violation.
- **Failure to Pay Rent.** Housing providers noted that one of the biggest challenges they face is non-payment of rent. This was the most common reason for eviction. Housing providers suggested that rental assistance for tenants would help address this problem.
- **Onerous Fees or Payment Requirements.** High fees are often charged for late rent. Requirements for payment of rent, such as needing to pay with a cashier's check, can be onerous. Students in particular complained of a requirement for one check received from multiple renters, which puts an undue burden on them to coordinate their payments.
- **Additional Fees.** High fees are sometimes charged for amenities such as parking, pets, or assessed when new children are added to a family.

## Occupation of Housing

### Living Conditions

There were different reports on living conditions in rental properties. Many participants, particularly those belonging to or advocating for vulnerable populations, reported serious issues and challenges with living conditions in rental properties. Housing providers provided a more positive picture of living conditions.

#### *Habitability Issues*

- **Threats to safety, health, and property, which include:**

- Flooding (particularly for farmworkers living in trailers or shacks along the river); for some immigrants, this has led to loss of documentation that is necessary to get and retain better housing
- Mold in properties (often in the aftermath of fires or floods), with an adverse effect on health
- Pests including ants, fleas, roaches, racoons, and rats
- Crime in poorly managed properties; lack of support for on-site managers in addressing unwelcome activity
- **Issues regarding relationships between neighbors**
  - Renters from vulnerable populations experiencing poor or criminal behavior or violations by neighbors, particularly in poorly managed properties, may be hesitant to report these issues due to fear of losing their place to live.
  - Conflicts between differing types of residents such as families and students, higher-income and lower-income residents, or due to other disparities such as language.
- **Overcrowding and Unsuitable Dwellings.** Due to difficulty of finding options, many, particularly members of the immigrant community and students, will choose to share rooms or apartments. In the immigrant community, there are often multiple families sharing residences intended for only one, sometimes in violation of the lease. Often there is only one worker in a family due to the unaffordability of childcare.
  - There were many reports of people living in unsuitable dwellings, often under an informal arrangement or illegal sublease, with unsustainable living conditions, such as garages without utilities.
  - Loss of housing through disasters often leads to remaining in unsuitable living conditions meant to be temporary (such as hotels). If the tenant does not have a lease, they are not able to access legal assistance.
- **Parking.** Lack of parking is an issue for many rental properties. One participant reported that the landlord had painted over the parking space numbers in order to sow conflict between neighbors who were trying to organize.

#### *Maintenance Requests or Issues*

- **Responsiveness.** Landlord responsiveness to maintenance requests or issues varies. Many renters, including students and participants in Spanish-speaking focus groups, reported issues such as: neglecting broken or damaged fixtures or appliances; not addressing issues promptly; or trying to address issues themselves rather than get help from specialists (e.g., pest control). Some renters need to replace necessary amenities such a stove or refrigerator themselves.
- **Charges for repairs.** Some landlords charge for fixes or renovation, even when they were needed to address habitability issues. Tenants reported that some landlords will not specify the requirements that will lead to getting their deposit back; or respond adversely to being asked to put deposit money into maintenance. Some renters reported issues with residences that are constantly under construction.

- **Fear of retaliation.** Renters who are members of vulnerable populations fear reporting issues due to potential negative consequences such as eviction, retaliation, loss of residence due to code enforcement, or impacts to immigration status.

#### *Mismanagement*

- **Management issues.** Some residences, particularly some large apartment complexes or affordable housing, lack on-site or competent management. This lack of regulation or oversight can lead to disruptive and problematic behavior with no recourse for other tenants. Some have also experienced disrespectful or threatening behavior from managers.

## **Relationships between Landlords/Tenants**

Both positive and negative relationships between landlords and tenants were reported. Comments included:

- **Value of a good relationship.** Landlords and property managers interviewed state that, in their experience, most owners / managers understand the value of good renters and go out of their way to support them and keep costs down whenever possible. They support code enforcement and the punishment of those landlords who are abusive or negligent.
  - Landlords and managers complained about the difficulty of evicting abusive renters, especially when protections are in force as soon as a lease begins. This can jeopardize their good relationship with other tenants.
- **Positive experiences.** Positive experiences were reported by some renters, including: lower maintenance costs; minimal rent increases; maintenance and repairs provided without raising rent or without excessive increases; and positive relationships with landlords that are attentive and helpful. Those who find rentals through personal connections may experience better relationships.
  - Some report that there is a clear distinction between corporate landlords vs. smaller or mom-and-pop property owners.
- **Negative experiences.** Negative experiences of relationships with landlords or property managers include: not fulfilling promises regarding refinancing or maintenance; rent increases without improvements; negligent, antisocial or criminal behavior in poorly maintained and monitored complexes; and fear of speaking up about issues due to potential consequences. Infill housing in unincorporated areas is often mismanaged and attempts to set regulations that will help improve conditions are met with resistance. Negligence on the part of landlords such as neglecting to keep up with mortgage payments can result in evictions due to foreclosure. Some reported that landlords may benefit from vulnerable tenants' lack of knowledge of their rights or willingness to speak or stand up for themselves.
- **Privacy.** Students specifically mentioned that some landlords lack respect for privacy rights, including coming in unannounced or frequent and/or unscheduled walk-throughs. Further, communications regarding maintenance and repairs, timing of inspections, etc., can be difficult, especially when coordinating with multiple renters.

## Leaving Housing

### Evictions

- Rental housing providers presented data to demonstrate that the majority of evictions both in Sonoma County and across the state are due to nonpayment of rent. A small number are due to the owner selling the property or moving into the unit themselves. Only a very small minority of evictions are due to other causes including tenant misbehavior.
- A different picture was given by comments from tenants in focus groups and some advocates or service providers. Legal processes around eviction can be unclear or arbitrary. Renters and advocates described many instances of illegal or inappropriate evictions, especially during economic downturns, some with insufficient notice. In some cases, tenants do not know their legal rights for length of stay. Some “self-evict” – receiving notice and leaving on their own because they do not understand their rights or are afraid of having an eviction on their record. This in turn leads to underreporting, making it difficult to know how many people are impacted. Some renters face homelessness due to eviction or inability to find housing. Renters can also lose their housing if ownership changes, particularly in housing such as mobile home parks which tend to be the last refuge of low income renters.

### Noticing, Return of Deposit

- Renters including immigrants and students described receiving insufficient notice of need to move. Students noted that although only 30 days’ notice is legally required, it is too little to plan ahead to find a new place, forcing them to move in haste. The inability to get a security deposit returned until that time also presents difficulties. Some who must move out in a hurry for various reasons lose their deposit.
- Security deposits are sometimes not returned, even though the residence was left in good condition; some are still charged to additional cleaning or repairs. Navigating legal processes for deposit disputes is challenging.
- Students noted that better-documented walkthroughs are needed at the beginning of occupancy in order to prove the conditions upon move-in. They would also be helped by a clear explanation at the beginning of what is and is not their responsibility, and the conditions under which deposits will be or not be returned.

### Where renters are leaving to

- Many renters, especially those with lower incomes or who face other challenges, are unable to find or afford other housing in Sonoma County if they lose their housing, forcing them to leave the County. Some face homelessness due to inability to find affordable housing.
- Those who leave but still work in the County are faced either with a long commute, which contributes to climate impacts, or seek work elsewhere. Lack of affordable housing for workers leads to employers having difficulty finding long-term employees.

## Resources and Ideas

Suggestions for resources and ideas to support and protect tenants' and housing providers' rights and best interests included:

### Education, Support, Outreach, and Liaisons for Tenants

- Education is needed to help tenants better understand leases and contracts, application processes, and their rights and protections. Suggestions included workshops; online sources, including a unified and accurate source of information on available and affordable rentals; and tenant liaisons who can assist with application procedures and explaining contracts or be involved in relations with landlords.
  - This education needs to be made accessible by being advertised and available in different languages, using non-technical language that is easy to understand, and by being presented graphically or through short videos for those who cannot read or don't read well.
- More outreach to tenants, particularly those in vulnerable communities, is needed, and must be inclusive of diverse communities. Outreach should be held in familiar and trusted surroundings that feel safe so that participants feel comfortable to share candidly. Outreach should offer childcare and refreshments to make it accessible to more people. Education should avoid creating additional fear for tenants. Some participants noted that they have been asked to share their input many times and have not seen how their input is put to use. This creates distrust and engagement fatigue, and even contributes to re-traumatization. Outreach should include follow-up to ensure that the feedback loop is closed, and that participants know what the next steps are.
- More programs are needed to provide legal assistance and resources for renters.

### Education for Housing Providers and Decision-Makers

- Landlords and housing providers need additional education regarding rights and protections.
- Decision-makers such as the Board of Supervisors or other elected officials also need to better understand policy. It is difficult to vote on these issues or communicate them to the public otherwise. Some advocates urged decision-makers to consider just cause and other protections as contributions towards reaching climate goals. Advocates expressed that relying on tenants to ask landlords to adopt electrification or energy upgrades, when many are already afraid of asking their landlords for anything, will not move those goals forward.

### Increased Advocacy and Protections

- Political advocacy and community organizing is needed to address housing issues, including rent control, rent registries, just cause, and other tenant protections. More equitable processes and treatment are needed.
- Clearer and better enforced guidelines are needed for rentals, including what can be charged per bedroom, square footage, number of bathrooms, etc. Improvements are needed to code enforcement, regulation, proactive oversight, and accountability for housing providers at the

County level, particularly larger housing providers who may not be based in California. Rights must be better protected by those who receive and have the power to address complaints.

- Some advocates suggested passing an urgency ordinance if it is not possible to pass all protections at one time.
- Better quality spaces with better maintenance are needed, with better amenities, particularly in cases where renters are assessed extra fees (e.g., for pets).
- Immigrants, especially undocumented renters, and Spanish-speakers are integral to the local economy. There is need for representation and support for immigrant communities in local governance and advocacy efforts.
  - More protection, options and support are needed for those who lack a social security number of other documentation and/or proof of income, or who may be without leases or social safety nets.

### **More Affordable Housing, Better Data to Inform Need and Investment**

- More investment and better funding are needed for affordable housing, as well as assistance with housing-related expenses. Mechanisms suggested to improve this include tiered impact fees; streamlined funding for affordable housing developers that are currently relying on a patchwork of funding streams, leading to complex and conflicting requirements.
  - Incentives should be provided to housing providers for renting to those who have vouchers.
  - Affordable housing should be built for those already living in the County, not those moving to the area.
  - Permanent and transient housing options with drug treatment support are needed to keep individuals needing treatment from becoming homeless.
- Better information and data is needed, and is available from agencies and those with lived experience, about the actual demand for housing. Better Census representation is needed – the true disparities are not being captured.