



THE STATE OF EVICTION PREVENTION IN ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA: A COMMUNITY ASSESSMENT

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**RACIAL
EQUITY
PARTNERS**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
APPROACH	9
FINDINGS	11
1. Risk & Causes	11
Black and Brown Communities	11
Lack of Knowledge about Available Resources	12
Reasons other than Non-Payment	13
Lack of Affordable housing	14
Housing Conditions	14
Childcare	15
2. Strengths	15
Rent Relief Program (RRP)	16
Local Organizations Providing Financial Assistance	16
Collaboration and Communication among Providers	17
AEPP	17
In-Person Outreach	18
3. Needs & Gaps	18
RRP Accessibility	18
Education & Awareness	20
Access to Legal Representation	20
Support for higher needs & Non-leaseholders	22
Data Sharing	22
Inclusive Planning	23
4. Potential Directions Offered by Focus Group and Interview Participants	23
Create a Comprehensive Eviction Prevention and Diversion Program	23
Address Gentrification & Displacement	24
Strengthen Tenant Protections	25
Improve Communication: New Strategies & Language Inclusivity	26
Expand Number of Housing Locators	27
Ensure Direct Legal Representation	28
Address Property-Wide Issues	29
Center Racial Equity	29
5. Spotlight on Property Managers & Landlords	30

Strengths	30
Property managers viewed the state requirement to support tenants facing evictions as a net positive	30
Property managers preferred the landlord portal compared to the tenant portal for accessing the Rental Relief Program	31
Needs & Gaps	31
Property managers stated a quicker processing time would improve RRP	31
Property managers highlighted the need for increased education and awareness of AEPP and prevention services	31
Recommendations for Improvements	32
Create a physical centralized hub for eviction prevention	32
Develop an online database for eviction prevention	32
Many property managers are willing to actively participate in outreach events that would support their tenants; however, cite a lack of landlord engagement	33
RECOMMENDATIONS	35
REFERENCES	35
APPENDIX A: Task Force Members	42
APPENDIX B: Key Informants	43
APPENDIX C: Interview and Listening Session Protocols	44

INTRODUCTION

Millions of Americans are at risk for eviction every day. Skyrocketing housing costs and stagnant wages make it impossible for many households to maintain housing stability. Their hours are reduced at work. They go years without a raise. They have a medical emergency or lose a loved one. Yet the rent continues to rise. As they fall behind, families owe not only the back rent, but also an accumulation of exorbitant fees. They also need to continue paying current and future rent.

For too many households, the math simply does not add up. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of people lost their homes, and many became homeless. The consequences are devastating for their health, well-being, educational achievement, and economic stability.

The pandemic has exacerbated the housing crisis and created the circumstances in which people across the U.S. are at imminent risk of eviction. Federal, state, and local eviction moratoria held the tsunami at bay, as did CARES Act rental and income assistance. Now, with the end of the federal moratorium, evictions are rapidly increasing in communities across the U.S.

Evictions are involuntary moves initiated by property owners or managers of rental housing. Landlords can initiate evictions for lack of rent payment or other lease violations. Evictions can happen either by formal court proceedings or by informal (often unlawful) processes that drive tenants out, such as stopping repairs, harassment, or tenants' lack of knowledge or trust in the system. In the U.S. in 2016, the most recent national estimates available, 3.7 million households received eviction filings. Due to the economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, household risk of eviction has surged, with an estimated 15 million people living in a household behind on rent. Across the country and Virginia, Black and Brown communities are at greatest risk (Joint Center for Housing Studies, 2020; Housing Opportunities Made Equal of Virginia, 2021).

Eviction can lead to homelessness, exacerbate poverty, and increase housing instability (Desmond, 2016). The scale of evictions and their negative consequences for the overall wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities has urged local, state, and national action to reduce and prevent them. Across the country, communities respond to eviction through services that help households avoid an eviction notice or, later, divert evictions from reaching the

courtroom, or help households navigate the legal process and stabilize their housing situations. Across prevention and diversion, best practices include emergency financial assistance, legal services, mediation and negotiated settlements, and social services. Evaluations of eviction prevention programs are limited, but emerging studies demonstrate greater efficacy for interventions where legal and social services partner to provide holistic services (Urban Institute 2021; Parrish, 2021). Below, we highlight specific promising practices.

Rent Relief and Financial Assistance

Non-payment of rent is the leading cause of eviction, so services that help tenants pay their rent and cover other household expenses is widely seen as key to eviction prevention. In a recent survey, 81% of property owners reported that they would be less likely to pursue eviction if their tenants had access to rental or cash assistance (Parrish, 2021). These interventions help keep tenants in their homes and support both tenants' and property owners' financial stability. Most programs aim to resolve evictions by providing tenants with arrearages to cover all or a portion of their back due rent. In addition, promising practices include:

- **Future Rent Relief.** Tenants in jeopardy of eviction due to loss of employment or a substantial cut of income often struggle to pay subsequent rental payments in the immediate upcoming months, and others struggling due to an economic shock (e.g., medical bills) may require several months to stabilize their income after exhausting their savings, neglecting other bills, or borrowing money. Some innovative programs provide rental assistance that cover a tenant's past due rent and provide funding to cover a portion, or all, of the tenants current and future rental payments. For example, the Washington State Department of Commerce provides up to 80% of a tenant's back and future rent. This strategy is currently being utilized in Virginia's Eviction Program.
- **Leveraging Funding to Relocate Rent-Burdened Tenants.** For some tenants, emergency rental assistance to remain housed at the same location is not an adequate solution. In some instances, a tenant can no longer afford the apartment due to a long-term decline in income or an increase in rental cost, or the conditions of the unit are poor and untenable. Under these conditions, the best solution for long-term housing stability is relocation. Some innovative uses of funding, such as the Housing

Consumer Education Centers of Massachusetts, allow funds to cover moving expenses.

- **Direct-To-Tenant Financial Assistance.** Many rental relief programs require explicit participation from property managers and landlords for tenants to access financial resources. To ensure all households in need of rental assistance received the necessary support, the U.S. Department of Treasury strongly recommends agencies to allow direct to tenant financial assistance (U.S. Department of Treasury, 2021). Direct-to-tenant assistance allows households to access rental assistance when landlords are uncooperative or unresponsive. Direct-to-tenant assistance may also help households with non-traditional rental arrangements who lack a formal lease, families doubling up, and households whose landlords face technological barriers in applying (Urban Institute, 2021).

Legal Services and Protections

Legal assistance to prevent evictions includes legal hotlines or helpdesks, tenants' rights and education programs, and, in some cases, full or limited legal representation (Parrish, 2021). Most tenants in housing court do not have representation, but most landlords do (Engler, 2010). Without legal counsel, tenants are less likely to assert their rights, more likely to default (not appear in court), and more likely to lose their cases. These situations lead not only to eviction from one's home, but in many cases are associated with costly payments and notices on records and credit reports. These barriers make it harder for individuals and families to rent a new unit. Access to a lawyer helps prevent eviction and increases housing stability (Desmond & Bell, 2015).

For the most part, legal aid for tenants at risk of eviction consists of informational and informal assistance, rather than a full attorney-client relationship (Greiner et al., 2013). Although some legal aid groups also offer full services to select tenants (e.g., cases in which tenants are very likely to win), only a few places have policies to assure legal representation as a right (Capps, 2019). Right to Counsel programs provide tenants with access to taxpayer-funded lawyers to represent them throughout the eviction process, and they increase access to justice and reduce the negative social impacts of eviction. Although these programs are expensive, policymakers and advocates cite costs saved from enforcement of eviction, homelessness response, social services, and reduced impact to the labor market, schooling, and healthcare (Bauman & Santos, 2018).

In addition to legal aid, policies that protect tenants' rights in the process of filing evictions can help prevent them. For example, requiring that landlords give extended notice before filing evictions for non-payment of rent, such as the 14 days required in Virginia since November 2020, can help tenants secure rental assistance. On a large, but potentially short-term scale, local, state, and national-level eviction moratoria prevent evictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, by making them unlawful in cases where households are unable to pay rent, attempting to obtain rental assistance, and would become homeless or have to double up if evicted. Other laws on the table before the pandemic include those targeting "For Cause" or "Just Cause" ordinances, which have the aim of preventing landlords from arbitrary, retaliatory, or discriminatory evictions.

Mediation and Supportive Services

There are many points before filing, after an eviction is filed, and even after a judgment that households and landlords can use support. According to the Urban Institute's (2021) national scan of eviction prevention and diversion programs, the most common program elements are "alternative dispute resolution," including negotiation and mediation. The goal of these programs is to divert the case away from trial through alternative settlement between the landlord and tenant. A recent survey of more than 300 stakeholders concluded that mediation, where a neutral third party helps facilitate an out-of-court agreement between landlord and tenant, cannot achieve housing stability for tenants as a stand-alone intervention, but should be paired with rental assistance and legal services. However, mediation helps flatten power differentials between tenants and landlords and can promote relationship repair, especially when mediators are trained in a trauma-informed approach (Parrish, 2021).

In addition to mediation, useful sources of out-of-court support for tenants facing eviction are housing navigators and locators. These terms may mean different things across communities and programs, but in general, they refer to trained human service paraprofessionals who provide outreach to people at risk of eviction, connect them to help with prevention and diversion services, support applications to rental assistance, and, in the case of relocation, help people stabilize in housing by finding, applying to, and moving into a new unit that fits their needs.

Holistic Approach

Overall, reports from the field suggest that the best eviction prevention and diversion programs are holistic efforts that bring together government agencies, non-profits, legal representatives, supportive services, and non-legal advocacy. Specific best practices can help strengthen each arm of a comprehensive effort. In addition, experts agree that tenants and landlords should both be included in program design (Parrish, 2021). Finally, it is critical to note that evictions increase in contexts of gentrification, where loss of affordable housing leaves tenants with constrained options and landlords with incentives to evict.

APPROACH

Since 2000, Alexandria, Virginia has seen an 88% decline of its market-affordable housing stock due to demolition and redevelopment (African Communities Together, 2021). The most far-reaching efforts will also include tenant protection laws, the preservation and creation of affordable housing, and wage increases. As housing costs have continued to increase, the economic stability of thousands of the city's residents has been shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic, and many are at risk for eviction.

Against this backdrop, the Alexandria Eviction Prevention Partnership engaged Racial Equity Partners (REP) to assess the state of eviction prevention efforts in the community and to craft strategies for AEPP and its partners to strengthen the network of supports that help families and individuals remain stably housed.

Beginning in July 2021, the REP team conducted assessment and planning activities:

- **Systems Mapping Session.** We held a session with key stakeholders to document how the eviction prevention system currently works, where it breaks down, and potential areas of focus for future efforts.
- **Tenant Listening Sessions.** We collaborated with community organizations to hold five in-person listening sessions with tenants to solicit their input on factors driving eviction, desired supports, and other key guidance. Participants received \$50 for their participation.
- **Landlord Listening Sessions.** We conducted three virtual listening sessions with landlords to understand their perspectives on eviction and their ideas for prevention and diversion.
- **Stakeholder Interviews.** We conducted 11 interviews with key stakeholders, including public agency leaders, community organizers, legal services, emergency financial service providers, housing and homeless service providers, and others. The goal of these interviews was to better understand the eviction prevention and diversion landscape and solicit feedback on areas for improvement.
- **Landlord Survey.** AEPP conducted a landlord survey in June 2021, which also informed this report.

This report summarizes the findings from the assessment and offers recommendations for AEPP and its partners in their efforts to expand and strengthen eviction prevention in Alexandria.

FINDINGS

Various themes emerged from our assessment and are presented below. First, we discuss the community's perception of the factors driving eviction in Alexandria and who among residents are most at risk as a result. Then, we highlight the strengths of the eviction prevention and diversion landscape in the city. Third, we share feedback on gaps and areas for improvement. Finally, we report the potential solutions shared in conversations with community members. Feedback from key stakeholder interviews and listening sessions with tenants are used throughout these sections. These results are followed by a spotlight on landlord listening sessions.

1. RISK & CAUSES

BLACK AND BROWN COMMUNITIES

Many participants noted that Black and Brown communities, both native born and immigrant, were at heightened risk of eviction in Alexandria. In interviews, participants cited demographic and zip code data on eviction filings to amplify this point. Several offered explanations for disparities, including the individual biases of landlords and property managers that impact decisions towards tenancy, and the structural inequities that create greater housing cost burden for households of color—including employment discrimination, low wages, and lack of generational wealth. The following quotes illustrate what we heard:

- "I view those who are most at risk [as] those who are the victims of both systemic and individual racism, right. And so within that a lot of the power I think comes from the landlords. If every landlord was cooperative and applied for rent relief and support them and did everything they could to be able to avoid eviction, that would be incredible. But we don't...They can choose who they're trying to evict and move forward with judgments and writs. And so, within that, like, well, how? What's their decision-making process? Are they biased against those who have an accent? Are they bias against those who maybe aren't fluent in English? Or if they're not able to communicate what their needs are?"
- "I would probably answer this question as an Alexandria resident and as a data person. When I think of most risks of eviction, I think of those in our community, specifically Black people and Brown people. Who are, who have a network of impoverishment, if that's one of the terms we use in terms of generational poverty. So those who have had it, they've had a history, but they're, they're coming from a family with a history of eviction due to systemic practices, of course. But that's the first thing that I think of when I think of who is **most at risk.**"

Many stakeholders discussed the unique risk for Hispanic/Latino households. In addition to discrimination, structural barriers for non-English speakers, and lack of generational resources to fall back on, participants cited the specific employment contexts that immigrants from Latin American tend to have and how the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated risk:

- “Many of (the Latin American population), their jobs were at great risk when the pandemic started, many of them working in restaurants or construction services, were highly impacted by the pandemic.”
- “Moms had to stay at home (to care for children) and that highly impacts the economies of the family because their income is so low, both parents need to work...very vulnerable, it just takes one little change to affect what the next month looks like.”
- “If we don’t have a job, we don’t have money to pay the rent. It’s really hard right now. I’ve only been able to get three days a week for work, no more. And only 5 hours. With 5 little hours I can’t pay the rent.” Participant from Tenant Focus Group

Undocumented residents are at particular risk. Comments included the greater likelihood that they were living in market rentals or subleases, rather than subsidized housing for which they are not eligible, or fear of seeking services due to potential perceived risk of immigration involvement or public charge-related consequences. One participant described the fear many undocumented people have in reaching out for assistance:

- “And a lot of them are afraid, and they don’t want to ask for help, because they don’t want to raise any red flags. So, I would definitely say that, you know, the undocumented residents are very, very higher risk for, for eviction.”

LACK OF KNOWLEDGE ABOUT AVAILABLE RESOURCES

In the interviews, advocates and service providers across financial, legal, and social services stated that there was a segment of the community at risk because they did not seek help. One explanation offered was lack of awareness about the available assistance or their rights as tenants. Others suggested lack of engagement was driven by fear or stigma related to applying for help, communicating and negotiating with landlords, or participating in court-based processes. In general, concern was expressed for members of the community that were not asking for help or not being contacted through outreach.

- “And then we know there are pockets of our community, that for whatever reason, for a multitude of reasons, don’t reach out to us for help. They may reach out to community agencies that they have more trusting relationships with, but maybe not. So there’s kind of a group of people that we,

when we work with, on these weekly kind of coordination calls that AEPP organizes and we're trying to reach out, there is consistently sort of a group of people who the landlords tried to reach out, we've [city agency] tried to reach out, nonprofits have tried to reach out, and no one's been able to successfully engage that household for whatever reason."

- "Residents that are not informed [are most at risk]. You know, because there is so much funding out in the community. And there are a lot of places that can provide assistance. But the residents that don't know about the programs that don't know where to get assistance, you know, they're going to be the ones that are not going to answer our phone calls, they're the ones that are not going to know where to go."
- "I've never applied for help from the city or state. Only the help that they've given me here (at Casa C). I haven't really looked for other options, since I can't read." (Participant from Tenant Focus Group)

The quotes below encapsulate the intersections of multiple risks, where immigrant and non-English speaking households and older residents with less access to the Internet are less informed and therefore at greater risk of eviction:

- "When I speak to a lot of these residents that only speak Spanish, or have their children translate for them, like, they're like, 'Oh, I didn't know,' or, like, you know, their kids are translating, so maybe they don't provide all the information. So, you know, they're not going to know what kind of programs are out there. And we only speak Spanish, but we do have a large Ethiopian population. So people that speak Amharic, they're also going to have difficulties if they don't understand. And then also, probably seniors that, you know, don't have access to the Internet. If they do, they don't know how to use that, you know, they don't know how to navigate everything, everything's online now. And if they don't have the right phone number, they don't know where to start. Because all you know, what they're used to doing is picking up the phone and calling someone."
- "The most difficult thing is when you don't know how to read, you don't know anything. You can know a few words here and there (in English) but to ask for help or receive it... you get a text message but you can't read it so you don't know anything. And so you look at the message and you don't know what it says." (Participant from Tenant Focus Group)

REASONS OTHER THAN NON-PAYMENT

Some participants noted the specific risk for people facing eviction for reasons other than non-payment, such as behavioral lease violations or non-renewal without cause. It was noted that cases of this nature are especially vulnerable as eviction moratoria are lifted.

- "And even when that moratorium goes away, I think that group is going to be really most at risk, because those evictions can't be prevented in the ways that we normally would prevent by paying or providing the financial assistance."

LACK OF AFFORDABLE HOUSING

In our various conversations, there was a clear understanding that evictions are in large part driven by rising rents and lack of investment and preservation of housing that is truly affordable for low-income households. Participants noted the loss of affordable units through development, with particular costs for communities of color.

- “The lack of affordability in the city, right. We have been losing affordable, what we call affordable units, whether our funding through the city, mostly because they used to be affordable, but you know, things have changed price have changed. For decades, we have lost maybe like 20,000 units that we used to call affordable, but they’re not affordable anymore, everything is getting really expensive. I think that’s one of the issues. The other one is the lack of investment of the city into working class people of color. They, the money that they have put in the past for housing and housing management, the housing funds, not necessarily really meet the needs of the community.”
- “Southern Towers, which is, you know, a large, large, complex, it’s sort of in in one of the higher need areas that they’re kind of that they want to evict people and they want to evict lower income people, and they’re trying to get sort of different tenants there...Of course, nobody’s like saying that’s what they’re doing. But of course, we know in Alexandria, like, the rent, everywhere, like the rent is going up. There’s a lot of renovations happening to places and so you can kind of see that there’s probably some of that happening.”
- “It’s hard because the longer you live in a place, the higher the rent goes, it should be going down because you’ve committed to living there. [I] got into a two-bedroom apartment in 2013, and it started at \$1,400 and it’s over \$2,000 now.”

HOUSING CONDITIONS

It is important to note that sufficient affordable housing will not meet the community’s needs unless housing is also safe and livable. According to interviewees, poor housing conditions often drive evictions, especially informal self-evictions, and make it difficult for households to stay stably housed.

- “[Some people] are living in miserable conditions...like the rats were in their house, the rats were in the kitchen, you know, like, the pipes were breaking, you know the toilets were dropping water. You know, in all this bad condition these kids were living there with a lot of roaches...And then you look at the law...what the law say, right? Nothing that we can do. That’s a private property. But then you go like but you as a city, you haven’t done your job, because you were supposed to be to ensure that that the health of those families are in good shape.”

Several tenants across focus groups discussed being forced to live in inhabitable housing conditions due to the lack of affordable housing in the region. Despite notifying their property managers, major repairs were ignored. Often, tenants were required to pay an additional fee for essential house repair.

- “These apartments are filled with mice, bedbugs, worms. Everything is in bad shape. The windows are broken and then when one goes to file a work order [the property managers] say, \$300 to fix a broken window. And then they fix things when they want, on their own time.” (Participant from Tenant Focus Group)
- “Look, they treat people like animals. Apartments that are so bad and about to fall apart. I had a stove, it broke and then it exploded 4 times! We spent four days without eating, until we just got junk food to keep going. Because those people are so mean! And they don't care that the poor people are suffering, and even knowing that there are kids! But when it comes to the rent payments, they're right on it.” (Participant from Tenant Focus Group)

Some tenants stated that property managers and staff would become angry if the tenant reported maintenance issues.

According to legal aid stakeholders, lack of enforcement and policies “with teeth” to address these issues perpetuate the problem:

- “Oftentimes my clients are like, I'm living in this horrible, horrifying conditions, but I'm on a month to month with a voucher. And so, my landlord's not going to do anything. They're going to give me a notice that says, 'bye, bye.' And I have to leave. So do I just deal with it so I don't get evicted, or do I move when I don't have the money to move?”
- “You try and do piecemeal, but especially at the end of the day, the end result almost always is 'well, they've tried enough so you can move.’”

CHILDCARE

Participants discussed the current, continued issues facing households, especially families with children, including the burden of inconsistent childcare and inflation of goods and services:

- “Even if they've gone back to work, and maybe childcare is open, childcare expenses are more now. I mean, I personally noticed myself the other day, I was telling somebody, I was at the store last week, and I was like, can I find some meat on sale? Oh my gosh, like how? And I think that's one of these other things now is that even though things are back open, like, prices are going up for everything. If you drive, you know, gas is still going up. So, again, like I said, if you're getting back to where your expenses are more now, which you know, I think is a challenge...”
- “And so when they get a positive case, in a classroom, they quarantined the whole classroom for two weeks... So yeah, childcare is expensive, and it's less, you know, available in some ways.”

2. STRENGTHS

Across REP's conversations with community stakeholders, we heard a general sentiment that Alexandria has unique strengths as a community, demonstrated

in its ability to come together during the exacerbation of the housing crisis. People described top-down buy-in from leaders who want to prioritize housing stability, a strong network of resources available, willingness to coordinate to get things done, and successful (though limited) efforts to engage households face to face.

RENT RELIEF PROGRAM (RRP)

There was wide consensus that the state funding for rental assistance because of the COVID-19 pandemic was “the best game in town.” This funding allowed larger amounts of rental assistance to reach households in need and therefore prevent eviction.

At least one participant noted how the city's leadership helped prioritize getting resources to residents:

- “Our people in our housing office, the understanding was when you work with them as a we're going to help these people or we're going to channel this money to them. So, I think administratively and bureaucratically, there were zero barriers. In fact, with the opposite, I really felt that it's the most rewarding thing that summer of 2020 just shoveling the cash in these people.”

The “Needs and Gaps” section will describe some of the barriers to receiving RRP funds and the difficulty of the process, but providers were clear that, despite these challenges, having these funds available made a huge difference to eviction prevention efficacy.

LOCAL ORGANIZATIONS PROVIDING FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE

Many comments amplified the robust local resources that were already available for individuals and families in need of financial assistance before RRP. Moreover, these resources continue to provide funding to fill in the gaps when households need small amounts of funding, do not meet RRP eligibility criteria, or for whom an application is pending but eviction is imminent.

- “We have a very good community of providers, emergency financial assistance providers, between churches and some of the community organizations that have always been there to provide support for low-income individuals or people that are struggling, even if it's a certain, you know, just a period of time and Alexandria. And I think that's very unique.”
- For small amounts under \$500, we have resources “I think if it's at a reasonable amount of money, we can gather together and help. And for a lot of people, just getting them through that hump is great, it works.”

It was also noted that local faith-based organizations have more flexible funding to cover non-rental related costs, which are sometimes necessary to keep a household stable and avoid eviction.

- “So you know, we try to stick to housing, and we try to stick to utilities and medical. And occasionally we go outside of that just because it’s the right thing to do.”

COLLABORATION AND COMMUNICATION AMONG PROVIDERS

Importantly, emergency financial assistance providers are not working in silos. Instead, these providers shared gratitude for the collaboration and communication within their network. This enabled them to target their services, and kept other parties (e.g., those who would refer residents to their organizations) in the know about available funding.

Collaboration extended beyond just financial service providers, with comments related to the strength of the overall network of nonprofit and public organizations dedicated to preventing eviction and working to address housing needs in the city.

- “And I would echo everything {redacted} said about the coordination, I think Alexandria is unique with the amount of groups that come together, whether it’s through coordination call she’s talking about or the eviction task force or, you know, kind of quasi-governmental, like there’s nonprofit government meetings happening, there’s ACT for Alexandria, which brings people together. So, there’s like a lot of sharing of information both like at the resource intensive level and also at the client level. And I think that’s unique in our city. In terms of finding and identifying needs.”

AEPP

Specifically, participants noted how the Alexandria Eviction Prevention Partnership (AEPP) plays a new, important, and effective role in serving as both a conduit of communication and coordination among providers and other stakeholders, as well as a clear first stop for people seeking support. Here is a more detailed description of the coordination calls mentioned above, which are organized by AEPP:

- “And so, the coordination calls provide an opportunity for us to really just circle around those individuals, especially the ones with the writs, who like I said, are, from my perspective at the most risk and say like, okay, is anybody working with this person? Yes, no? If so, where are they at? If not, who wants to reach out? And how can we try to establish a connection and see we’ll out to the landlords and see where they’re at in the process, try to work with them. See where they’re at, if they’re still in the unit, so on and so forth and go from there. So, it really gives an opportunity to have that just like, let’s say, last ditch effort.”

Additionally, several people described the convenience of having a clear place to refer households. For example, a school social worker said:

- “Now that AEPP exists, I feel more comfortable I can say, hey, family, call this number or go to this community-based clinic, they’re going to be in your neighborhood tomorrow, bring all your documents and they’ll help you in person.”

IN-PERSON OUTREACH

In-person clinics, such as those hosted and organized by AEPP and the Office of Community Services, were widely viewed as effective and useful. Because, as we describe further below, reaching all households in need and supporting them in navigating rental assistance applications are challenges, the in-person clinics are a strength because they meet households where they are and provide direct support from trained staff.

- “And then we’ve also been doing community outreach, going to community locations, I’m particularly going to like the actual property and collaborating with the landlord has been really an intervention that I think has been helpful because the landlord has the documentation that’s needed. So, if someone comes in, if we’re at their apartment complex, it’s right down the street from where they live, they come in to get our assistance, and we can gather that information from the landlord on site right there.”
- “I really like these community centered face to face...like they do over at Morgan Properties...it makes a big difference for a lot of clients to be able to go in and see, you know, friendly face, who speaks their language, is not intimidated by the forms.”

3. NEEDS & GAPS

Those we met were eager to share feedback to improve the landscape of services and protections for people at risk of eviction. This section includes the primary gaps identified during our conversations.

RRP ACCESSIBILITY

Although RRP was viewed positively as an indispensable resource to help with rental assistance, stakeholders reported significant barriers to access, including time, language, technology, and eligibility.

First, completing applications was often described as daunting. For tenants, required documentation, literacy, and technology were barriers that led to slow processes and often a need for direct support.

- “And I mean, the forms and, you know, the sheer literacy, if you will, of the forms, I mean, because you can’t take that for granted either because you have people who, even if English is not their first language that they may not be literate in their first language.”

- “But it’s even, there are smaller properties that have said, all we can really do is just direct them to the tenant portal. And that’s where we run into the problems because the landlords at least know what’s needed and what they have to come up with in order to, to assist the tenant. The tenants don’t always know that, and they don’t have always have the best capacity for using technology and doing things online.”
- “Again, language and technology has a whole lot to play with regards to I would say, immigrants, immigrants and people who have limited knowledge of English language and technology. So they always find it extremely, very difficult to, to apply. So those are the things that I would identify as one of the barriers to participation.”

There are also barriers for landlords. For smaller landlords, there is less capacity to complete forms for each individual tenant. In addition, it was perceived that small landlords may have less financial flexibility to wait for assistance to arrive:

- “I was talking to some landlords the other day, and most of them identified, then the application process for them, [a barrier is] the length of time it takes them to get their money from the state. So, most of them identify that as a possible barrier to participation in the program.
- “A more streamlined process, maybe for some of the mom and pop, because I just don’t have the few private landlords that I knew that were trying to apply, like, on my bed, landlord side, and it was just, it really was a lot more daunting and labor intensive for them. But to the point that they literally, I was talking to one person, he was like, I would always be better for me to go to court and try to get the person out, which is sad, that they would rather see, you know, they felt that it was easier to go through the process to try to evict someone as opposed to try to, like, get them assistance.”
- “Sometimes more of the private landlords are not [easy to work with], because a lot of times they’re dependent on that rental income. So, you know, pay their own mortgage and if they’ve got a second property, so, you know, they don’t have as much flexibility or, you know, leeway to sort of let my to not collect month’s rent for months at a time.”

Even though providers want to help and are often trained to help, individual and organizational capacity was spread thin and often insufficient.

- “I feel like with our community for them is just challenging, even we are fluent in Spanish, for them, their level of literacy, it’s, it’s very low, so it’s just hard for them to navigate. And sometimes as much as we are capable of, we contact directly to the landlord. ...there are some landlord or managers that are very great and communicate and give us what the client is needing. But yes, it’s just, it just takes forever, like the level of bureaucracy is just crazy. And it takes a lot of calls and like follow ups and just like that, so something to keep doing is just increasing capacity. We are very grateful we receive funds from the city for the bridge funding to increase capacity, but still is like, not enough to, to be able to support it with the RRP, which we know the funds are there everything, but it’s just very time consuming. And even like, can cause burnout in the staff members. Because it’s just like, it’s just, it’s just hard...we cannot advertise it like to say everybody can come to [us] because we don’t want to give that false idea that we can help everybody and anybody that comes through our doors.”

- “The biggest [gap] is just the manpower. You know, there's...three of us. But we just, we just can't keep doing it. It's very difficult. And there's constantly, you know, new residents coming in and more questions. But, you know, our job titles aren't eviction prevention specialists, we have the work that we have to do for the organization. So, it's, it's very difficult to maintain.”
- “These churches are also, you know, needing support. I think that having that administrative support in general, I know, legal services or Northern Virginia does some of that, and that's who they keep sending everyone to but, you know, there was other, you know, even like a training, you know, option. So then, you know, if the churches wanted to send their volunteers to learn how to apply, and then they can help their community as well. I think that would be really helpful. Because it's just the legwork that really is time consuming.”

Finally, several people identified a gap for households above the RRP income eligibility requirement:

- “I think also the other challenge we see is just at the base level, people don't qualify so like their income is just at that tipping point. So they don't qualify for some sort of assistance that's out there. So expanding some of the qualification I guess I don't know how to word that but making it easier for people to qualify like saying those income thresholds a little higher. Especially in such a high cost of living area, like maybe what works.”

EDUCATION & AWARENESS

A consistent theme was the need for better outreach, communication, and dissemination of information, and education for tenants about their rights and the resources available. Within this, getting accurate and trusted information to people who are not fluent in English was a large gap.

- “I think education [is a gap]. Even though we are lucky for having a lot of nonprofits, we still do a work sometimes thinking that being in the office and saying we are here and putting announcement, people will get the message right. And most of the times, that doesn't work. The only way that it will work is for you on in the community, face to face. That's how you meet people. That's how you build relationships. That's how you build trust, right?”
- “And in the middle of the pandemic, last year, we started putting two people to work in a specific community, which is almost 3000 apartment units, and we found that around 70% of those families, they didn't know that they have that financial assistant rent program in place...they were selling cars, they were doing all of these kinds of things, just to survive to believe in that survival mode. Right? Because they didn't know that they could apply because no one in their language ever told them.”

ACCESS TO LEGAL REPRESENTATION

Legal aid resources exist in the city, but several participants pointed to gaps in the accessibility of these supports and the lack of direct legal representation:

- “Well, they have to be income eligible in order to use Legal Services of Northern Virginia - income eligibility, which is very low. And they also have to know to contact an attorney. One of the things you'll see on the wish-list is legislative recommendation...for requirement that legal representation...So the landlord is always going to have legal representation, but the tenant quite often will not. And if they don't know who to reach out to, or they don't qualify for some reason, or you know, we can't get them an attorney, that's very difficult. But if I'm, if we could get the right to, to counsel for people being evicted, because it is a civil process, we could then you know, there could be court-appointed lawyers just like there are in criminal cases.”
- “I was going to add that, because of the income is so low that most people can't qualify to be assisted by Legal Aid, we alternatively send them to, like, legal referral service, law referral service or law referral center. And they charge maybe a low amount of fee to speak to our clients for maybe up to 30 minutes. But still, that amount of fee that they are charging, even though it is low, is also very difficult for the clients to be able to raise such funds. So legal representation is very, very important in order to combat the eviction process here.”

When REP asked our tenant focus groups about accessing legal services when facing eviction, participants were unaware of the process of obtaining legal services.

- Facilitator: “If you're being taken to court for an eviction is there legal assistance available?”
Focus Group Participant: “I don't know anything about that.”
- Facilitator: Legal aid, is it easy to access legal aid if you need it?
Several participants responding at once: “A lawyer? No. No. There's no money to pay a lawyer.”

Specifically, at least one person highlighted the lack of legal services for people who are undocumented:

- “Being flagged as undocumented and being, you know, having that fear of being sent away.... An example of that is the legal services of Northern Virginia, they can't help those who are not who don't have documents.”

Importantly, one stakeholder described the impact that the lack of legal representation can have, even if there are technically other points in the process where households can get support. For example, families may self-evict as soon as they get a letter threatening eviction, because they know that if they went to court, they would be on their own.

- “But every time you ask families... ‘there was an opportunity for you, why you didn't show up to court? When you show up to court, they laid out for you what you need.’ The first thing they say is ‘uh-uh, I have been in court in the past or my friend has been in court in the past. And what they do is that they get there with a judge and with a lawyer, they don't even let you speak. You don't have no rights.’ So, it's that in their mind, people who have been there, or they have heard someone else have been there in court... So I have been bringing the idea that people what they need is legal representation...you know, they need to feel like there is someone who's going to back them up...someone who

knows their rights was going to be on their side...(But as a task force) what we've been looking at is how we can help more families with less resources. If you are already in court, you are on your own. [This perspective may be] because they never have been exposed to it."

SUPPORT FOR HIGHER NEEDS & NON-LEASEHOLDERS

Another gap reported was lack of resources for vulnerable groups for whom direct rental assistance may not meet their needs. First, people who are doubling up or subleasing are harder to reach:

- "Working with Alexandria community, that there might be in some of these overcrowding situations where there's two or three families living there. Well, one family that's on the lease might be getting assistance. But then the other two families are not and they're struggling and you know, being able to support them and letting them know, like, hey, there's assistance for you as well."

Additionally, there are limited resources for people with disabilities and other complex needs that inhibit their ability to pay rent in Alexandria. Although there are some permanent supportive housing resources within the homelessness response system for people already unsheltered, those resources do not meet the breadth of need to prevent displacement:

- "I would like to say is the individuals with chronic and multiple presenting issues as it relates to their housing, whether it's mental health, transportation, disability, medical, they're going to have, it's not I mean, they would be in this situation most anyways [regardless of the pandemic], like, and so and those are in this. We have individuals who will never make enough money who were just going to be priced out. And the affordable housing market is so tight and availability is so low that what do we do with these individuals? That is that is a perennial question that has not been answered. And I don't know that it necessarily can be answered under the current construct that we have."

DATA SHARING

As described above, collaboration among providers is a key strength of the community's eviction prevention and diversion landscape. However, a few stakeholders mentioned lack of data sharing capacity as a limitation to collaboration at a formal level.

- "We've done a great job communicating among our community agencies that are helping people to try to collaborate, but there's no like, you know, system that we can all document information in. And just because of different, you know, the city's confidentiality kind of guidelines that we have to follow. And then, you know, different organizations have different missions. And so, we've never, we've never had a good, like, systematic way to share data, like we've been trying to do it, but it's not like, there's not like a bigger picture way to do it that works."

- “The lack of coordination. Not in the sense of wanting to coordinate, but as it relates to data sharing, and I, and that’s understandable. Everybody has their own processes and consents, and you know, PII [personally identifiable information] is important, and the privacy of it is incredibly important. But in terms of like that also, is a roadblock, to having more of that system wide coordination across things.”

INCLUSIVE PLANNING

Stakeholders from different aspects of the system shared a desire for better inclusivity of low-income people and communities affected by eviction. By not including people with lived experience at the table in an empowered form, the design of programs and policies might be misinformed and less effective. In addition to tenants, landlord representation was also lacking.

- “While there is a lot of, you know, with the task force and like willingness to coordinate I don’t know that the right people are always in the room. It is pretty striking to me, and I’m just being candid. Like it’s pretty striking to me that there’s not a landlord representative on the task force for example that I know. No, I don’t I don’t believe there is, you know, so that there’s the who’s in the room matters a lot...if that’s what drives the policy, you’re losing those key voices.... I don’t, I don’t know that we have, I don’t know that there’s an individual have lived experience...the [system mapping] session, with the post it notes, just hammered that home to me... You’re just like, Oh, my gosh, there’s like, this is it’s so informed from the service provider lens that you’re missing key things. And I think while the want to is there a lot of times on the coordination I think the assumptions around biases around access, and both language access, technology access, are certainly real. I mean, if I have to try to explain to somebody, why can’t they just come to the office one more time, I’m going to lose it...just realities of living in poverty.”
- “if they’re reaching out to [members of affected communities], I know that most of the techniques that they use, we’re going to create this committee and this committee, you know, things that the city loves to do...and that’s not a space that is safe for people, you know, like, no one from the community without English or all those skills will be part of something like that. I think they’re trying to use more like the nonprofits, right to be like the new nonprofit representative to be part of these conversations. But at the end of the day, I feel like it’s just only a checkbox, or maybe I am just in the defense mode, because I just feel like it’s a checkbox, right?”

4. POTENTIAL DIRECTIONS OFFERED BY FOCUS GROUP AND INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

As strengths and gaps were identified, conversations moved into concrete suggestions. These included ways to address gaps with new programs or policies or scale up aspects of the systems that are working well. This section describes these ideas, often framed as “wish-list” items. After this section, we build on these ideas to offer recommendations for next steps.

CREATE A COMPREHENSIVE EVICTION PREVENTION AND DIVERSION PROGRAM

Stakeholders suggested that future efforts be as holistic as possible, reflecting best practices in the field of eviction prevention and diversion.

- "I know that there are positive results from eviction diversion programs. So, I think it would be a combination of rental assistance, staffing to assist to make sure people receive the rental assistance, legal protections, and eviction diversion."
- "I would use [future] funding to establish a more robust counseling services to renters... it will involve hiring personnel. It also involves working with legal aid. It will also involve direct contact with the clients, and then the landlords in order to be able to work together, holistically, to prevent eviction."
- "I think, an eviction court model, like a housing court model that other jurisdictions have utilized to try to help tenants at risk of evictions. So, you have kind of like a multidisciplinary approach with like, attorneys, social workers, different maybe nonprofits being involved to provide supportive services to prevent evictions and have the court kind of be part of that."

Related to creating a comprehensive program, at least one stakeholder suggested that the city be a strong leader in this effort.

- "It's a patchwork, right? It's a puzzle, and we have to make all the pieces fit between nonprofit partners between city partners, government, non-government, private, public...but there are some things that just need to be institutionalized. I'm thinking about, like, even the data and the tracking and things like that, I think, and I think the city is starting to dedicate more to that but I think that coordination piece, I think I would like to see some of that...there's only so much a nonprofit can do at the end of the day... leadership has to come like, that institutional leadership and buy-in and space for that, should come from the city, I believe, or some governmental organism, you know, entity. And so, I would like to see something there. And I mean, that doesn't mean that there isn't like the nonprofits aren't massively important to everything, because they can do things that the city can't, but at the end of the day, it's going to drive so many key components of the response."

ADDRESS GENTRIFICATION & DISPLACEMENT

Stakeholders were strong in their desire for efforts to address housing market dynamics-- rising rents, redevelopment, and gentrifying neighborhoods.

- "I will just encourage us also to continue to think about gentrification, and what this eviction and exodus of the community mean, especially with Amazon, joining us as neighbors, so just continue to do that. And yeah, like, protect as much as we can affordable housing... even one of our staff just moved further away, because she was unable to pay their rent, and she grew up in Alexandria."
- "I guess one thing we didn't really say is that housing is extremely expensive. rental housing and affordable housing that's affordable to the families that live in the housing is not available. For the most part to most people. I think if we had enough affordable housing for everyone that needed it at the level of income where they were, that would be a magic wand."
- "The government is spending so much money to pay rent...and that's good. I'm glad that's happening. This is a band aid. But if all of that money had gone on the front end, and we just fixed

up existing housing, but also built additional affordable housing, how much of that problem would be solved there, too?"

Another suggestion was for more public and non-profit housing. Specifically, actors within the homeless service system discussed the utility of dedicated permanent housing for people with greatest needs:

- "Funds that would actually purchase housing, not just provide rental subsidies, we have people who have barriers that don't allow them to easily or at all get a lease in their name. And Rapid Rehousing requires that the lease be in the client's name. So having permanent supportive housing or permanent housing options that maybe are owned by maybe a nonprofit or someone who could then lease to these clients would I think be helpful."

STRENGTHEN TENANT PROTECTIONS

Ultimately, participants argued that although the pandemic exacerbated need and created a sense of urgency, the needs existed previously. In this light, there will be substantial need once pandemic-related protections and supports expire.

- "I think in Virginia, some laws have changed. But as everything, you know, I think with the housing crisis, what we have been doing is more like in a surviving mode, things have been changing every month, sometimes every two weeks. But at the end of the day, this is like a bandage to the big issue that we have, right? Because when we use all the money, when all these laws expire and protections are not in place, we have nothing in place to really support our people."

Some specific policy recommendations came up to better protect tenants, including:

1. Rent control:

- "So, if you have a limitation to rent increase, such as 5% or 3%, no more than 2%, that will, in my opinion, ameliorate the problem of eviction. So, we have to have some form of government control with regards to rent in order to have a handle on the eviction."
- "I mean, I don't know if this is realistic, but to have a cap on how expensive places can be, to or to require whatever 50% to be fixed rates for either affordable housing or like medium income housing. Yeah, I think legislation but even when legislation is put people go, people get around the system."

2. "Just" or "good-cause" eviction:

- "For-cause evictions would be a big one...if a landlord in Virginia does not like a tenant, right now, they're limited in being able to evict them for non-payment, but they are not limited to evicting them just because they give them notice that they're not extending their lease. And so, if there's really not a lot an attorney can do, if the landlord just doesn't renew the lease, because the law allows for that. There's really no defense."

3. Revising the retaliation statute:

- “The one thing that needs [to be addressed] is the retaliation statute because... it’s Virginia code, but it has no teeth, you know [If] someone has a voucher, they’re month to month, terrible housing conditions, well, I’m not going to complain, because they’re just going to give me a 30 day notice you have to move out, no reason. And the retaliation statute basically says, if there’s actually a legal reason someone can ask you to leave, then it’s not retaliation. So I’m like, but that’s exactly what is happening. They were retaliating! They gave them notice, even though they’re legally allowed to do that, right when they made a complaint. Like that whole retaliation statute needs to be fixed, tossed out, re-scratched, to allow these types of defenses.”

4. Comprehensive City Housing Inspection:

- “They should go and check/inspect the apartments because they turn black. I have a son who is allergic and he has the sniffles that never go away because these apartments always turn black, and they don’t go paint them, and since they don’t have insulation then he gets sick, and he doesn’t get better. And then when they go and do inspections they don’t go to those apartments, they only go see the good ones, and then we’re left in the same boat.”

IMPROVE COMMUNICATION: NEW STRATEGIES & LANGUAGE INCLUSIVITY

Several groups of stakeholders suggested improving communications to harder to reach households. Representatives from Casa Chirilagua, for example, have been successful using WhatsApp to improve communication with clients. Other participants similarly mentioned WhatsApp as a potential strategy.

- “I think we would need to be kind of creative and outside the box with some communities specifically, just because of language barriers or what have you. So maybe WhatsApp, WhatsApp groups, and if those, those are available in certain communities flyering.”
- “So yeah, so you continue to increase like I’m building communications. I know that the city has tried to do different efforts with the app. And Alex St. 11. But not our community doesn’t really navigate those, like platform. So yeah, like, I encourage everybody to always use like WhatsApp...And yeah, so and to reach as many people as we can to give on point communications in their language.”
- “WhatsApp is really big, especially from my experience, like in the Latino community, with just like a preferred way of communication and using those channels.”

Language barriers for non-English speakers were a big gap identified, so people were clear that translation of every resource was important, as well as supportive providers able to speak a resident’s language.

- “Yeah, just yeah, continuing to translate as much as possible every resource, every application every like, yeah, every project to try to have that like translation, not just in Spanish, but in other languages, too, that are in the area, I think that’s very valuable. Because that makes people feel included. And they know what is happening.”

- “We have a translation line, you know, language line, there's others that have translation services, but like, there's nothing that can make there's nothing that can replace, having somebody that sits across from you that you know, that can speak your language that you know, it can relate to you.”

Related to communication, participants highlighted the importance of messaging in a way that addresses stigma against help-seeking.

- “I think for some households, it's seen as embarrassing or weak or, or a negative mindset to receiving assistance and help in order to allow their household to remain stabilized. And so, if there was a way to make receiving assistance, normal, acceptable, positive thing for the community, along with that education, I think would encourage more folks to come forward and seek supportive services earlier than at the very last second.”

EXPAND NUMBER OF HOUSING LOCATORS

Another concrete suggestion was to increase capacity for housing navigation and location services. Non-profit and city agency representatives reported a desire for more funding for these positions.

- “The one thing we really need is funding for housing locators, for city funded housing locators, either in [the Office of Housing] office or DCHS, because we're not going to be able to prevent all of the evictions. And we also have evictions that aren't monetary, where the landlord just doesn't renew the lease. Those are the people that we're going to have to relocate. And if we've got people that are in housing that's just too expensive for them going forward...we're going to have to find them something that is more affordable to them, in order to prevent them from being homeless. So, housing locators, we've had a lot of conversations about this, is an extremely staff-intensive process where the housing locator has to work through an application with them, they'll have to take them to see properties. They have to contact landlords, they have to coordinate where the assistance is coming from, and that's something our staff just doesn't have the capability of doing right now.”
- “What we've been trying to get the numbers for and advocate for currently, are housing locators and navigators. So those [housing navigators] who are doing that outreach, door knocking, being able to reach out to those who perhaps are at risk of becoming evicted or have writs, and then once identified, being able to refer them to the housing locators who can then help them with either connecting with affordable housing or resources, you know, resources in the area to be able to forward.”

Representatives from legal aid described a striking need for housing locators. These positions served as upstream eviction prevention, helping to communicate with legal services and prevent tenants from entering a bad situation.

- “And the idea for prevention is to inform right at the beginning of a tenancy...I was in contact with housing locators, because I think that's important for legally to be in contact with because they're providing access to housing. And when you're in contact with housing locators, they'll say, here's a problem with an application. Here's a problem with the lease, here are some problems up front, which kind of may impact what is happening when they get to the eviction stage.”

ENSURE DIRECT LEGAL REPRESENTATION

Lack of direct legal representation was a gap reported by several stakeholders. Although targeting resources to earlier stages of prevention is vital, knowledge that someone will be supporting you in court may help reduce self-evictions and open more time for early prevention interventions to reach a household in need of support. One person stated that even if new funding is not available, shifting funding into this area may be warranted.

- “We have to create a structure. Because right now, nobody has been challenging those landlords. Right. And it's the same landlords that have been against our community for decades. Right. So, I think if we had the money, we start changing the structure...I will say, even if we don't get new money, they should *shift* some money to get some legal representation.”

BUILD LOCAL CAPACITY

We interviewed representatives of grassroots community organizations whose missions include educating community members about their rights, organizing tenants, and direct-action campaigns in support of housing justice. Providing resources to organizations such as these, with strong and trusted relationships within communities, was highlighted as a solution to issues of communication, education, and outreach to those who are not seeking rental assistance and other services.

- “People don't know, when you pass a law, you have to also do outreach to educate people. And as far as I know, you know, organizations like us did not get any funding to educate tenants on this issue, right. Like, we had to find other resources from other organizations, foundations, and just, you know, straight up from our general budget, to organize tenants, just in one apartment building, to go knock doors to talk to people.”
- “They haven't made any investment in community organizations to make the work that they do effective...That's the real way to get people to get access to people to talk to people.”

We also met with two school social workers, both of whom support families and refer them to eviction prevention services in the city. One of them helped nearly 200 households since the start of the pandemic. Non-profit providers acknowledged the work of school-based personnel, and suggested building up capacity there:

- “I'd like to see actually more in the schools. Because I think we have so many families, that it feels like such a target of opportunity there to do, if it's not outreach, it's, you know, it's like really embedding some of those things in and with school programming, because that's a place where people go every day.”

ADDRESS PROPERTY-WIDE ISSUES

In some instances, people suggested that property-wide approaches would be more effective than unit by unit ones. For example, people wished RRP could be administered in this way:

- "I would say one barrier is that the application process is for each individual resident, which is understandable, but if it could be more streamline per property. That's not in our purview, but I think that is a barrier because there's so much documentation for each individual application. And there's a lot of landlords I've spoken with, they said, you know, one of the challenges is getting the resident to provide the documentation. There's just so much back and forth and shuffling...But I think it is a barrier, just the individual tedious applications for each household rather than perhaps a property-wide assistance program."

This recommendation also aimed to address health and safety for residents facing poor housing conditions:

- "We don't have the resources, even as legal aid, like we can't be everywhere. And I just think if you are a local government, this is what your attorney's office should be doing. Like for these bigger building issues, like fix it."
- "So, I do think housing conditions is a systems issue, where government and other people like code, unfortunately, they need to step it up. Because the tenants can't do it."
- "How many of these buildings, you hiring a pesticide company for that building is not going to fix the building issue, because it's a building problem, right?"

CENTER RACIAL EQUITY

Finally, interviewees shared the importance of addressing eviction from a racial equity perspective. As one person said, the community's response should include "Ensuring that everything that we're looking at, we're looking at it from a racial equity mindset, and the impacts that that has on the system and how to address that in the most appropriate way."

Another person reminded that as eviction prevention and diversion efforts engage with non-social work personnel, that there potentially be opportunities to offer training to those parties on implicit bias so that people have equal access to services available:

- "As social workers, you know, we get training about like bias, and we get training about, you know, we get a lot of support in the area of like, really aware of those things. And I can tell you just from anecdotal conversations with landlord staff, like they don't, that's not at the forefront for them. So it's, it's a lot of like, well, this person is really trying, and I'm like, Well, what does that mean?...Why do you feel like this person's trying versus that person not trying?"

5. SPOTLIGHT ON PROPERTY MANAGERS & LANDLORDS

This section is organized around strengths, needs and gaps, and areas for improvement identified by property managers and landlords in our listening sessions. Illustrative quotes from listening session participants lead each theme.

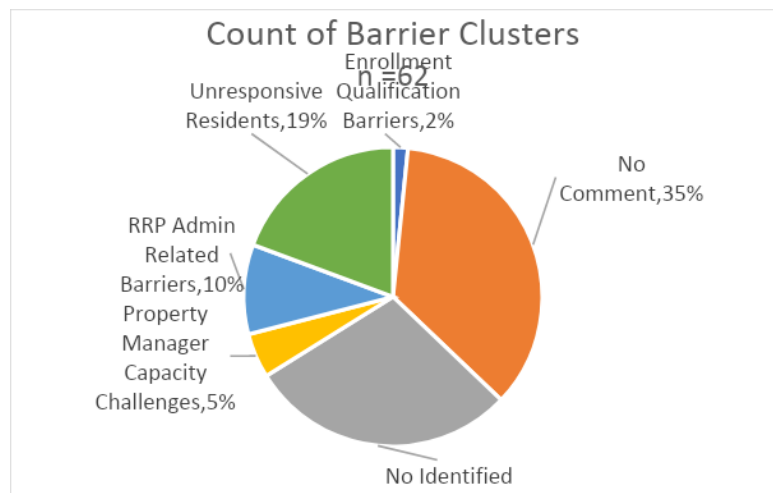
STRENGTHS

PROPERTY MANAGERS VIEWED THE STATE REQUIREMENT TO SUPPORT TENANTS FACING EVICTIONS AS A NET POSITIVE

"It's kind of a win-win. I mean, you're maintaining your occupancy, you're, you know, keeping your delinquency down, people aren't losing their homes during You know, this time. And it really is, in my opinion, doing the best job that it can do. It's doing what it was intended to do, which is keep people in their homes during COVID and make sure that they can, you know, have a roof over their heads and not have the burden of worrying about their housing, being paid for our process."

The property managers we interviewed perceived the new state policy that required landlords to notify and support tenants in applying to the state's Rental Relief Program was beneficial. Property managers felt having a resource that they could directly utilize to support tenants and avoid evictions was a "win-win" scenario for them and their tenants. Property managers, particularly those with many lower-income tenants, described the early months of RRP as

overwhelming due to the large number of households that required support. However, now that most of their tenants who were significantly behind on their rental payments have received RRP, property managers stated that the process is more manageable.



The Office of Housing conducted a survey to get information from landlords who participated in RRP. Of the 62 respondents, 64% of the respondents did not cite any barriers to utilizing RRP funding for their tenants.

Property managers who completed the survey cited receiving documentation from unresponsive residents as their biggest barrier.

PROPERTY MANAGERS PREFERRED THE LANDLORD PORTAL COMPARED TO THE TENANT PORTAL FOR ACCESSING THE RENTAL RELIEF PROGRAM

"I definitely prefer the grant management system side of the program, versus the program that the tenants can make their own application online. And the reason why is because we have better, I don't want to say control, but for lack of a better word control over what's going on. We know we've uploaded all the correct documentation; we know everything's been signed; we know the ledger has been attached. And so, when we do it that way, it just seems to be much more effective, and also a lot less stressful for the residents."

Several property managers stated that the tenant portal provides a quicker response time to receive funds; however, they preferred the property manager portal. The property management portal helped the property managers track the rental relief process for their properties and it made it easier for tenants to request additional financial support via the RRP amendment process.

NEEDS & GAPS

PROPERTY MANAGERS STATED A QUICKER PROCESSING TIME WOULD IMPROVE RRP

"I would like to see them improve on is just the turnaround time for processing the applications. I don't mind providing them what they need in order to authorize the funds. But I do mind sometimes how long it takes them to get those funds to us...[property managers] get phone calls from stressed out residents and you're trying to alleviate their concern, and they just see each month that their balances growing."

Property managers stated that wait time for RRP from the State took several weeks and sometimes months to approve. The prolonged wait would cause some tenants to have anxiety and would require property managers to spend additional time managing the RRP process.

PROPERTY MANAGERS HIGHLIGHTED THE NEED FOR INCREASED EDUCATION AND AWARENESS OF AEPP AND PREVENTION SERVICES

"So I'm definitely familiar with the program, we actually held several outreach events for our residents, both campus wide and individual building events that invited the eviction prevention program to come and it consisted of members from a live from the city's social services departments just depend, you know, health and, you know, monetary like the snap and the WIC program and things like that, a live came with food and nonperishable items that people could go just walk up to the van and take a bag of food if they needed it."

"I haven't actually [heard of the Alexandria Eviction Prevention Partnership or ALIVE] I'm taking notes so I can you know get more information on this because it sounds really amazing and something I'd like to take advantage of and see how I can help my residents, I am actually looking at their website now. I have not been directly in touch with ALIVE. I know you, some of our residents

may have because I've seen some payments through them but not as far as me reaching out to them."

Several large property managers were aware of Alexandria Eviction Prevention Programs due to AEPP's direct outreach to their property. For example, several property managers from Morgan Properties cited the weekly outreach fairs hosted by AEPP as a key resource for their tenants. The fairs provide tenants with RRP applications support, donated food, and light-touch case-management.

However, property managers from smaller properties and non-centralized properties did not know of AEPP or have extensive partnerships with AEPP partners. The smaller property managers welcomed the support of having food drives and rental assistance support on their property.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENTS

CREATE A PHYSICAL CENTRALIZED HUB FOR EVICTION PREVENTION

"We don't have a physical address that we can just send [tenants] over to, I think we definitely should ask for a specific location, if we can actually send them out there."

Several property managers cited the need for a centralized hub to refer their tenants. Some participants cited AEPP pop-up shops as helpful but wanted a physical location where they could refer tenants to get financial and case management support. While the property managers cited that they appreciated supporting their tenants during the COVID-19 pandemic, they felt their tenants would need more nuanced support once COVID-19 relief funds were exhausted and the criteria for receiving funds changed.

DEVELOP AN ONLINE DATABASE FOR EVICTION PREVENTION

"I have a list growing with the whole pandemic thing, because sometimes I know about some organizations or churches and all the sudden a resident say, Oh, I went to this other place. So I keep adding those places in my list. And I send those over to residents from time to time, just because if they cannot get assistance through the RRP program, they can explore those other options as well."

"I personally think it would be amazing if the city could have a point of contact that was kind of like the one that is familiar with a lot of these organizations. And then maybe on the city website, they had like a link for property managers or something along those lines, just like a property managers resources kind of thing. And I mean, they may already have it, and I just don't even know."

Property managers could not identify an online platform where they could find the various charities, churches, and other non-profit organizations providing eviction prevention resources. Some property managers would create their own list based on their personal interactions with clients over time; however, none of the property managers interviewed felt confident in their list being comprehensive or up to date.

Property managers discussed the need for the City of Alexandria to have an online platform that provided a list of resources property managers could utilize directly or refer tenants to utilize. They also recommended an online newsletter that provided upcoming food drives and resource getaways.

While property managers wanted to know about the various activities going on in the community that their tenants could take advantage of, they cited that their primary duties as property managers limited their time to become actively aware. Passive mechanisms like a newsletter or a website were viewed (by landlord participants) as feasible ways to keep property managers informed. They also encouraged the city to have more landlord engagement activities.

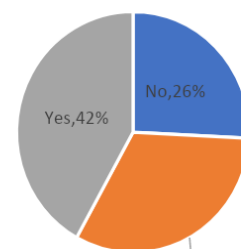
MANY PROPERTY MANAGERS ARE WILLING TO ACTIVELY PARTICIPATE IN OUTREACH EVENTS THAT WOULD SUPPORT THEIR TENANTS; HOWEVER, CITE A LACK OF LANDLORD ENGAGEMENT

"I'm really not in contact with [the city] at all. I just going through the RRP program, that's really the extent, sometimes I'll reach out by phone, you know, making phone calls to them. And, you know, asking why [an application] still pending what the holdup is. Other than that, that's really my end point with them. It's probably because I'm on such a smaller scale. But, if that line of communication was open, and there was like a central port, where everybody was able to, you know about the different events going on, I would definitely take advantage of that, and a lot more."

Property managers, especially those with fewer tenants, stated that they did not have a lot of engagement with the city and were unaware of the community resources and initiatives available to their tenants. Participants of our focus groups stated that they would be more involved in the different initiatives available, if the city engaged them.

According to the Alexandria Office of Housing Property Manager Survey, 42% of the respondents stated they would be willing to actively participate in housing outreach events. This data suggests landlords and property managers

Property Managers Interested in Hosting Outreach Events
n=62



would be willing to be more involved in tenant support initiatives. However, it is unclear if and how the city has intentionally engaged property managers.

Focus group participants stated that establishing ongoing landlord engagement opportunities would be beneficial and well received by landlords and property managers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings in this assessment, our team recommends that AEPP and its partners build on its current work to ensure the eviction prevention system in Alexandria is:

- Comprehensive
- Holistic
- Collaborative
- Shaped by those most impacted

While the recommendations outlined below are grouped into broad areas of activity, they should be undertaken in a way that is deeply grounded in community coordination. The goal is to create an eviction prevention system that works efficiently for as many people as possible, reducing barriers to access for tenants as well as landlords/property managers. Some recommendations can be implemented quickly with existing resources, while others will require longer-term planning and significant infusion of new funding. Taken as a whole, the recommendations will result in a much more comprehensive, coordinated, community-wide effort that will provide housing stability for our neighbors.

1. Rental Assistance

1. Develop outreach and eviction prevention plans for households nearing the end of Virginia Rent Relief Program (RRP) assistance.
2. Create a city-coordinated rental assistance program. Services should include direct to tenant emergency rental assistance to cover back rent, resources for future rental payments, and funds to relocate rent-burdened or otherwise insecure households into situations of greater stability.
3. Design a system to prioritize assistance to households most at risk of eviction, homelessness, and negative outcomes from housing loss, while also investing enough resources so that working families in need of shallow and/or short-term funds can receive support.
4. Coordinate to provide dedicated service navigators by area, and ensure regular, recurring outreach that includes one on one application support.

5. Explore expanded access for hard-to-reach households, including options for rental assistance for undocumented individuals and families and advocating for requirements that landlords share rental assistance resources directly with tenants.

2. Coordination

- a. Develop one stop shop for services. Such an approach would serve not only as a single source for referrals, but also as a source for coordinated outreach, continued RRP support, and collaboration on public education events.
- b. Create an “Eviction Prevention Czar” position to ensure clear communication and accountability. This position should be housed within city government, but would also coordinate closely with non-profit providers, the legal community, landlords, and the faith community to help all these groups remain committed to a shared direction.
- c. Create an emergency response team composed of city and non-profit staff to serve as a hub of communication are the direst cases (e.g., households facing immediate eviction) to mobilize resources and connect households with rental assistance, legal support, and other resources.
- d. Continue to expand the number of housing locator and service navigator positions.
- e. Develop an online portal (database) for eviction prevention resources and activities in Alexandria; make it widely available to non-profits, faith community, legal advocates, and landlords.

3. Tenant Education and Access

- a. Create (or refine) a set of tenant rights educational materials, including brief videos, fact sheets, and information about where to access rental assistance and legal services. Ensure that all materials are presented in multiple languages. Low-income tenants should be involved in developing, reviewing, and refining materials.
- b. Develop strategy for disseminating educational materials through workshops, information fairs, in person outreach, and coordination with property managers/landlords. Provide workshops and other outreach activities in multiple languages.

- c. Identify and target the highest need (opportunity) neighborhoods/zip codes for in-person educational events that include one-on-one RRP application support.
- d. Invest in building capacity (people) of existing community-based organizations so that they may expand the number of tenant organizers/outreach workers to deliver this direct service work. Recruit, hire, and train trusted providers that can work with tenants in their native languages.
- e. Ensure that service providers make use of accessible forms of communication with clients and potential clients, including apps like WhatsApp as well as forms of in-person support that do not require access to technology.
- f. Complete user-testing of the application process to ensure the process, forms, and technologies are as low-barrier as possible.
- g. Provide support for tenants to reduce technology barriers, including offering assistance completing online applications at non-profit organizations and a potential “one-stop shop” center.

4. Landlord Engagement

- a. Consider creating a more streamlined portal to provide information and access to rental assistance applications for landlords/property managers; regularly update online platform to keep them informed about landlord and tenant resources.
- b. Conduct quarterly focus groups/conversations with landlords and property managers to understand their concerns and barriers to participating in rental assistance programs.
- c. Identify landlords with the highest rate of evictions, and conduct targeted outreach/educational activities to ensure that they are aware of their obligation to support tenant rental relief applications and that they have easy access to available resources.
 - d. Provide education through print and multimedia materials, webinars, and in-person workshops on improvements to the eviction prevention system.

5. Legal

- a. Expand resources to support direct legal representation for households at risk of eviction.

- b. Expand tenant education opportunities about legal services that are available to support them.
- c. Strengthen tenant protections through advocacy efforts to support strategies such as:
 - Advocate legislation at the local and state levels to set caps on annual rent increases at a fixed rate (e.g., <5%)
 - Address “just cause” eviction legislation to prevent landlords from forcing tenants to leave simply because the landlord chooses not to renew the lease.
 - Revise the retaliation statute to strengthen enforcement and accountability, with the purpose of protecting tenants who may, for example, complain about poor housing conditions.
- d. Continue creating opportunities to solicit input from diverse stakeholders, including people with lived experience, service providers, legal aid, and tenant rights organizers to identify and bolster additional tenant protections.

6. Housing Quality and Affordability

- a. Survey tenants annually to assess housing conditions.
- b. Advocate for city-funded housing inspectors who can provide free inspection to low-income tenants.
- c. Explore the feasibility of a program to provide financial assistance for housing repairs to landlords of market affordable properties.
- d. Create more permanent supportive housing for households exiting homelessness.
- e. In addition to greater tenant protections (e.g., rent control, mentioned above), advocate for legislation supporting the preservation and production of affordable units, including inclusionary zoning, density bonuses, and contributions to the city's Housing Trust Fund.
- f. Incorporate planning to actively overcome patterns of residential destabilization based on race/ethnicity and provide equitable quality, affordable housing to communities of color. Look to and meet with communities most impacted by eviction, gentrification, and displacement for ongoing solutions.

Conclusion

To begin advancing these strategies, the Alexandria Eviction Prevention Partnership will need to develop a year-by-year implementation plan. Such work should include structures to support implementation (e.g., teams for each strategy area); targets for raising new funding; measurable outcomes and timelines; and a process for tracking progress and holding one another accountable.

If successful, these efforts will be transformative for the community and for the lives of untold numbers of people who currently live in daily fear of losing their homes.

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APPENDIX A: TASK FORCE MEMBERS

The Alexandria Eviction Prevention Task Force guided these efforts and shaped the recommendations included in this report. Members are listed in the table below.

Name	Role	Organization
Alison Coleman	Co-Chair	DCHS -Office of Community Services
Lesa Gilbert	Member	DCHS – Director, Center for Economic Support
Tim Gleeson	Member	Alexandria Sheriff's Office
Melanie Gray	Member	Christ Episcopal Church
Mary Horner	Member	Legal Services of Northern Virginia
Danien Johnson	Co-Chair	Director, ALIVE! House
Rawles Jones	Member	Community Member
Eric Keeler	Member	Alexandria Office of Housing
Katherine Key	Member	City of Alexandria
George McAndrews	Member	City Attorney's Office
Karen Moore	Member	DCHS – Office of Community Services
Dipti Pidikiti-Smith	Member	Legal Services of Northern Virginia
Melodie Seau	Member	Alexandria Office of Housing
Kelly Stone	Member	Economic Opportunities Commission
TBD	Member	Carpenter's Shelter – Rapid Rehousing
Evelin Urrutia	Member	Tenants and Workers

APPENDIX B: KEY INFORMANTS

We interviewed the following individuals to inform the assessment process.

Name	Role	Organization
Bert Bayou	Director, DC Area Chapter	African Communities Together
Stefan Cain	CoC Lead Administrator	Partnership to Prevent and End Homelessness (PPEH)
Alison Coleman	Director	Office of Community Services
Genevieve Fields	Community Services Supervisor	Office of Community Services
Melanie Gray	Director of Outreach and Mission	Christ Episcopal Church
Ratna Hilscher	School Social Worker	Charles Barrett Elementary
Mary Horner	Staff Attorney	Legal Services of Northern Virginia (LSNV)
Danien Johnson	Director	ALIVE! House
Eric Keeler	Deputy Director	Alexandria Office of Housing
Shelley Miller	Case Manager/ Program Coordinator	ALIVE! House
Elisa Mondragon	Operations Manager	Alexandria Housing Development Corporation
Allen Lomax	Community Leader	Partnership to Prevent and End Homelessness (PPEH)
Mary-Parker Lamm	Deputy Director	Carpenter's Shelter
Dipti Pidikiti-Smith	Director of Advocacy	Legal Services of Northern Virginia (LSNV)
Melodie Seau	Division Chief	Alexandria Office of Housing
Shannon Steene	Executive Director	Carpenter's Shelter
Evelin Urrutia	Executive Director	Tenants and Workers United
David Wynne	School Social Worker	Hammond Middle School

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW AND LISTENING SESSION PROTOCOLS

This appendix includes the questions the REP team used for interviews and listening sessions.

Key Informant Interview Protocol

Questions:

The following questions provide a semi-structured starting point for the interviews. We will tailor follow up questions to the expertise of each stakeholder.

1. How does eviction come up in your work?
2. Who do you think is at greatest risk of eviction in Alexandria?
3. What are the best resources available for people facing eviction in the community?
4. What are the biggest gaps in eviction prevention & diversion among the people you work with/for/advocate on the behalf of?
5. If Alexandria were to receive new funding for eviction prevention and diversion services, how do you think the funding should be allocated and used?
6. What would help you, in your specific role?
7. Do you find that different agencies within the eviction prevention/diversion landscape collaborate and communicate with each other? *(How so? / If not, why not?)*
8. Do you think the current system of eviction prevention services is inclusive/equitable to all people, regardless of race/ethnicity, citizenship status, household composition, and ability? If not, how?

Tenant Listening Session Protocol

- Introductions
 - Purpose
 - PERMISSION TO RECORD
 - \$50 gift card to participate
1. What is causing tenants to become at risk of eviction?
 - a. What impact has COVID had on evictions in Alexandria?
 - b. Are certain populations (racial, age, country of origin, household composition) more likely to get evicted than others?
 2. What resources are tenants currently using to avoid evictions?
 - a. What makes these resources helpful?

- b. Are these resources easy for everyone to access? Who is not able to access them and why do you think?
3. Are there barriers to receiving legal aid when facing an eviction?
4. What resources are tenants able to use after they are evicted? Are these resources easy for everyone to access?
5. If Alexandria were to receive new funding for eviction prevention and diversion services, how do you think the funding should be allocated and used?
6. Do you think the current system of eviction prevention services is inclusive/equitable to all people, regardless of race/ethnicity, citizenship status, household composition, and ability? If not, how?

Landlord Listening Session Protocol

- Introductions
- Purpose
- Permission to record

Questions

1. Can you each briefly share our name, pronouns, current position, and the community we are a part of?
2. Property managers are now required to serve tenants who don't pay their rent with a written notice informing them of state and local rent relief programs, as property managers what are the benefits of this approach?
3. Are certain populations (racial, age, country of origin, household composition) more likely to get evicted than others? Are there certain populations harder to support than others?
4. Alexandria Eviction Prevention Partnership has established a network to support tenants in maintaining housing, have you (or your colleagues) collaborated with AEPP? If yes, has the relationship with AEPP been beneficial in keeping tenants housed?
5. If Alexandria were to receive new funding for eviction prevention and diversion services, how do you think the funding should be allocated and used?
6. Are there any final comments you want to share with our team?