

Chester County Legislators Meet with Nonprofits to Discuss Housing Experiences in Chester County

The group, comprised of Chester County elected officials, representatives of community nonprofits, and local advocates met to hear testimony and a call to action.



Picture 1 (Left to Right): Representative Dan Williams (74th Legislative District), Senator Katie Muth (44th Senatorial District), Chester County Commissioner Josh Maxwell, Mayor Peter Urscheler of Phoenixville, Mayor Lillian DeBaptiste of West Chester. Not pictured: US Representative Chrissy Houlahan (Pennsylvania 6th Congressional District), Representative Josh Lawrence (13th Legislative District)

Picture 2 (Left to Right): Cheryl Miles, Representative Dan Williams (74th Legislative District), Senator Katie Muth (44th Senatorial District), Chester County Commissioner Josh Maxwell, Mayor Peter Urscheler of Phoenixville, Mayor Lillian DeBaptiste of West Chester, Rob Henry (Administrator, Chester County Partnership to End Homelessness), Hallie Romanowski (Executive Director, ACT in Faith of Greater West Chester), Leandria Hall (Program Director – Special Programs, Oxford Area Neighborhood Services), Amy Scheuren (Program Director, Kennett Area Community Services), Matrice Johnson (Director of Programs, Home of the Sparrow)

WEST CHESTER, PA - August 24, 2022 - Chester County Commissioner Josh Maxwell, in partnership with several nonprofit community organizations, hosted a legislative gathering, at the West Chester University Graduate Center. The goal of the gathering was to share some of the voices heard during recently held housing focus groups, and to explore ways legislators and community groups can work together to ensure affordable and accessible housing is available to all residents of Chester County.

During the week of Aug 16th, local nonprofits including Home of the Sparrow, Orion Communities, Act in Faith of Greater West Chester, Kennett Area Community Services, Community Youth and Women’s Alliance, Oxford Area Neighborhood Services, Habitat for Humanity of Chester County, Oxford Silo, Black Women of Chester County in Action, and the Chester County Partnership to End Homelessness, partnered with The Housing Alliance of PA to host six focus groups. The groups’ goal was listening to and lifting the voices of people with lived experience and expertise to make substantial positive changes in the rust belt, rural, and

inner ring suburb communities. A total of 61 individuals shared their testimonies and experiences regarding housing in Chester County.

The event featured presentations from Cheryl Miles, Chairwoman of Black Women of Chester County in Action, Wendy Gaynor from Orion Communities, and a video compilation of resident's housing stories.

Following the presentation, a "Call to Action" was presented jointly by Kris Keller, Executive Director of Orion Communities, Dale Gravett, Executive Director for the Housing Authority of Chester County, Matrie Johnson, Director of Programs at Home of the Sparrow, Leandria Hall, Program Director for Special Programs at Oxford Area Neighborhood Services, Amy Scheuren, Program Director at Kennett Area Community Services, and Rob Henry, Administrator for the Chester County Partnership to End Homelessness

Said Cheryl Miles, in her opening remarks, "We have to ensure that low-income individuals have access to safe, decent, affordable, housing. We chose to amplify residents' voices so as we are making important decisions about housing in Chester County, we are taking into consideration this particular population and working for low-income residents."

Kris Keller, in her remarks and call to action, spoke to the residents most at need.

"When we talk about low and extremely low-income families, it's helpful to remember who this includes - child & elder care workers, bank tellers, grocery store staff, lawn care providers, support staff - people who help keep everyone's lives running smoothly." Keller said. "But it also includes elders and neighbors who have a disability who are trying to make ends meet with just social security income."

Leandria Hall, in her remarks explaining the differences between the HUD definition of homelessness and the definition from the McKinney-Vento Homeless Act stated, "We should address those most at risk, but it is also clear that we as a community need to be more proactive to get care or resources to those that have been diverted from the street, particularly when that diversion has been short lived."

The program continued with a presentation by Amy Scheuran explaining how diversion programs delay or prevent a legal declaration of homelessness based on the HUD definition.

"In the short term, Chester County can increase support, funding, and case management for diversion services." Said Scheuran. "This funding and support should be flexible in nature due to the various difficult situations that residents find themselves in."

In his call to action regarding Fair Housing Guidelines, Rob Henry reflected "We need to work together to create a community in which *all* Chester County residents have fair, equal, and equitable access to housing opportunities and services to improve their health, quality of life, and financial stability. This event serves as an example of that work, but also how much work still remains to be done."

Mayor Peter Urscheler, marking the beginning of closing remarks, stated “It is really up to each and every one of us to play a role in figuring out this (housing) challenge, this is a society challenge, and it will take all of us in the community working together.” Mayor Urscheler continued “My dream is that you drive down the street and you can’t tell the difference in affordable or market rate housing because we should be a community.”

The event concluded with remarks from US Representative Chrissy Houlahan.

“While access to quality and affordable housing is an issue across the county, it is particularly acute here in the 6th Congressional District, especially in Chester County.” The congresswoman continued, “The pathway to affordable housing begins with fairness and equity for all. The issue of equity and equality is not just an issue of the individual, it is in fact an economic issue for all of us, a health issue for all of us, and a human rights issue for all of us in the community.”

The legislative gathering was well attended by the county’s legislative delegation, county officials, legislative staff, and nonprofit representatives:

Chester County Legislative Delegation and Elected Officials

US Representative Chrissy Houlahan, Pennsylvania 6th Congressional District

Senator Katie Muth, 44th Senatorial District

Rep. John Lawrence, 13th Legislative District

Rep. Dan Williams, 74th Legislative District

Mayor Lillian DeBaptiste, West Chester

Mayor Peter Urscheler, Phoenixville

Eden Ratliff, Manager, Kennett Township

Chester County

Commissioner Josh Maxwell, Vice Chair

Robert Kagel, County Administrator

Erik Walschburger, Deputy County Administrator

Dolores Colligan, Director, Chester County Department of Community Development

Legislative Staff

Tia L. Watson, Regional Director SEPA, US Senator Bob Casey

Conor Johnston, Constituent Advocate, US Representative Chrissy Houlahan

Ryan Beaston, Legislative Director, Senator Katie Muth

Steve Warhola, Chief of Staff, Senator John Kane

Michael Hartman, Chief of Staff, Senator Carolyn Comitta

Ethan Shaffer, Constituent Services Director, Senator Carolyn Comitta

Sara McCullough, Chief of Staff, Senator Tim Kearney

Tyler Arkatin, Chief of Staff, Rep. Sappey

Nonprofit Representatives and Community Advocates

Lynn Majarian, President Board of Directors, Kennett Area Community Services
Lisa Teixeira, Member Board of Directors, Kennett Area Community Services
Luis Tovar, Commissioner, Advisory Committee for Latino Affairs
Jim Mercante, Member Steering Committee, Southern Chester County Opportunity Network
Sara Pantazes, Director of Faith Formation, First Presbyterian Church of West Chester
Rachel Lebus, Executive Director, Oxford Neighborhood Services
Susan Tatelman Singer, Community Advocate
Diego Reyes, Berkshire Hathaway Home Services
Monte Woodward, Community Youth and Women's Alliance
Alexandra Roa, Court Appointed Special Advocates of Delaware and Chester Counties

Participants and Organizers:

Cheryl Miles, Chairwoman, Black Women of Chester County in Action
Kris Keller, Executive Director, Orion Communities
Wendy Gaynor, Orion Communities
Dale Gravett, Executive Director, Housing Authority of Chester County
Hallie Romanowski, Executive Director, ACT in Faith of Greater West Chester
Leandria Hall, Program Director – Special Programs, Oxford Area Neighborhood Services
Amy Scheuren, Program Director, Kennett Area Community Services
Rob Henry, Administrator, Chester County Partnership to End Homelessness
Lila Singleton, Community Youth and Women's Alliance
Matrie Johnson, Director of Programs, Home of the Sparrow