



ALAMEDA COUNTY
the new war on poverty

2018
COMMUNITY
LISTENING
SESSIONS REPORT

May 2018

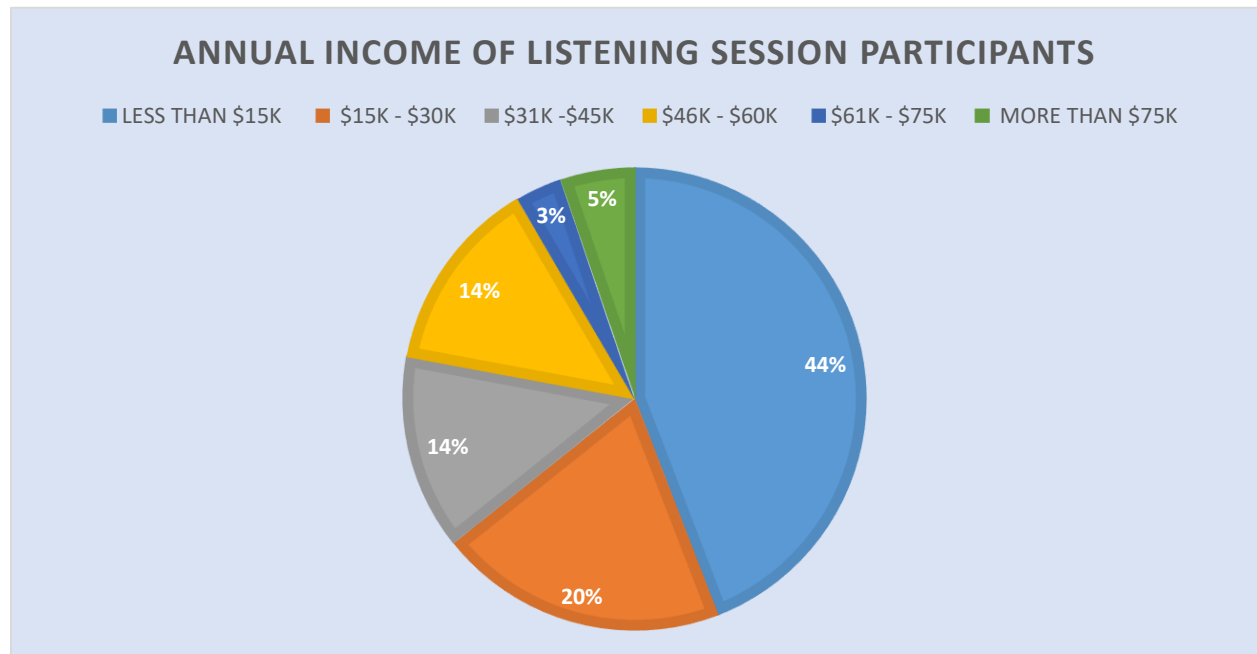
What Makes a Listening Session ALL IN?

For the past three years, Community Listening Sessions have been ALL IN’s way of engaging community members and finding original and innovative ideas for fighting poverty in Alameda County. To do this, ALL IN recruits organizations and community groups from neighborhoods around the county to plan, conduct outreach for and facilitate listening sessions, as well as report the outcomes to ALL IN.

ALL IN launched the third round of listening sessions on December 7, 2017 by announcing a request for community proposals to conduct community-based research. This cycle expanded upon previous listening session cycles by offering each grantee the option of holding community forums, conducting one-on-one interviews with residents or a combination of both. After a one-month application period, ALL IN received 50 applications and selected 32 of those applicants to offer mini-grants to hold their own sessions.

We strived to make this round of listening sessions our most diverse cohort to date. The geographic spread of grantees ensured that nearly half of the sessions took place outside of Oakland. In addition, because 46% of Alameda County residents speak a non-English language, we aimed to have approximately 40% of the conversations held in languages other than English.¹ Of the groups who received funding, 18 were nonprofits, 13 were community groups and 1 was a mission-driven business. Issue areas covered in this year’s sessions and interviews covered four major categories of ALL IN’s work:

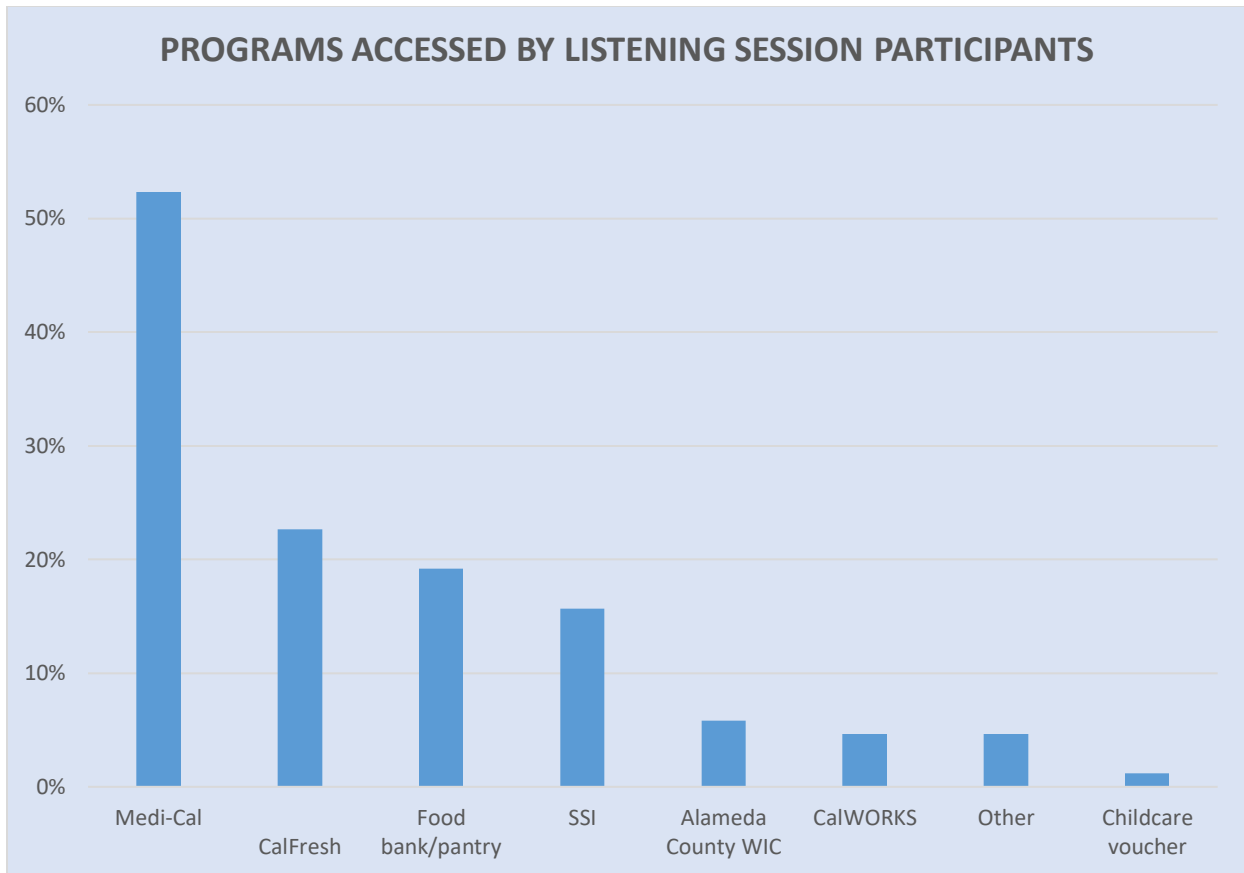
- affordable housing
- early care and education
- economic empowerment
- healthy food access



Participant data is self-reported on a survey of 172 people who attended listening sessions.



After holding listening sessions and/or conducting individual interviews, each grantee submitted a final report to ALL IN. We aggregated the data to find key trends among listening session participants and interviewees that spoke to the economic and financial challenges they navigated on a daily basis.



What We Learned

As in past years, most of the participants noted that the most economically challenging part of living in Alameda County is the high cost of living. Participants pinpointed multiple financial stressors on their household budgets in each of the reported categories and emphasized that the economic challenges that they face were interconnected—most other expenses like buying quality food or maintaining utility bills, for example, seemed impossible without first having affordable housing.

They also noted the importance of finding living wage jobs to being able to achieve any of those goals. The parents among listening session participants connected the need for affordable childcare to being able to work. However, the participants in each listening session were also ready to offer solutions. The following is a summary of what they said.

Affordable Housing

By far the most common financial stressor mentioned was the availability and cost of housing. Whether participants were renters, homeowners or unsheltered, they described specific challenges related to their housing status. For example, one listening session grantee reported that “some parents said they were living 5 people in one bedroom.”ⁱⁱ And participants in another listening session said they were devoting well over half of their income to housing—one person as much as 80%.ⁱⁱⁱ Those who could afford housing often said there were major repairs or fixes needed to the places they rented, such as mold removal or pest control, or felt that they lived in an unsafe neighborhood.

Even after finding affordable housing, participants said it is not always possible to secure. For example, some landlords require that renters pay three months’ worth of rent (first, last and deposit) upfront, or have unattainably high income requirements, so residents in some cases find themselves only being able to sublet a room for themselves and their families.^{iv, v} Incidents of housing discrimination based on race and/or immigration status were also noted.

Participants also stated that a high rent burden was a key financial barrier that locked them out of ever buying a home in Alameda County. Coupled with wages that haven’t kept pace with the cost of living in this area, they felt housing prices made a pathway to homeownership impossible for them.^{vi} Participants identified down payment assistance as essential to helping them own homes of their own.

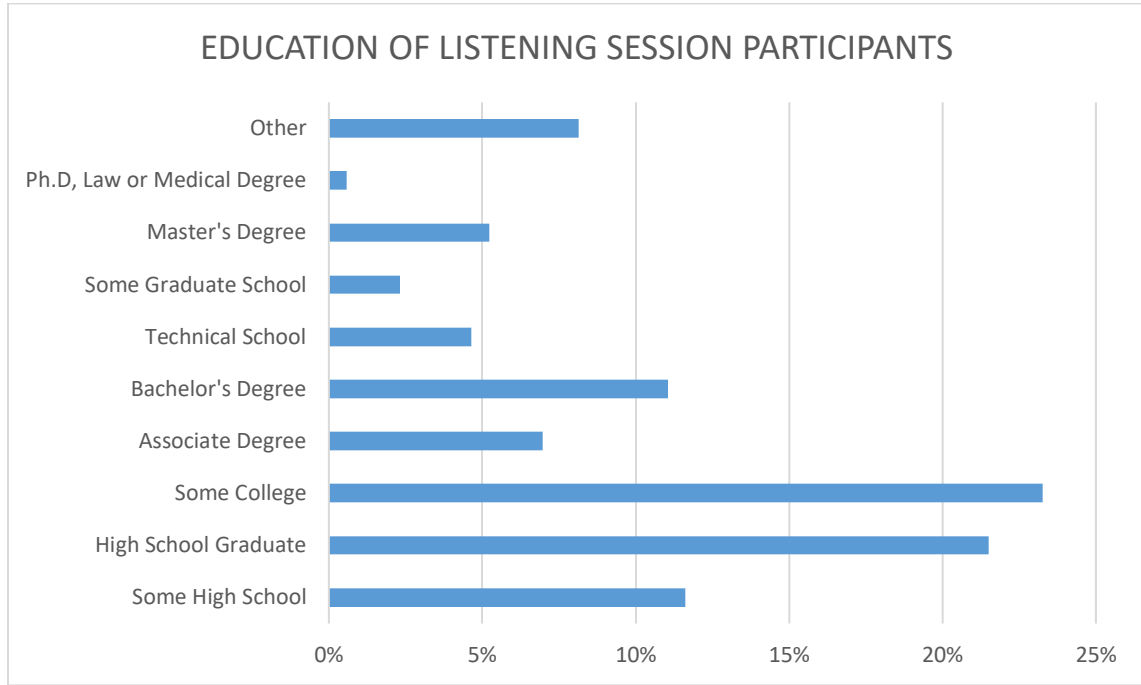
Moreover, among several grantees’ sessions, there was a recurring conversation about native residents of Alameda County not only being excluded from the housing market but also being pushed out of their communities in general. David Modersbach, management analyst for Alameda County Health Care for the Homeless, summed up this pattern in his report when he wrote, “Most all participants were born and raised in the city where they are now homeless.”^{vii} Likewise, a participant in Janevette Cole’s listening session told her that when the rent on her Hayward apartment was increased by more than \$700, she sought help from local government and nonprofit agencies. Ultimately, she said, “Other than being told to move to Modesto or Stockton, I had no help.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In several listening sessions, the need for affordable housing eclipsed other financial needs.^{viii} For example, listening session grantee Rakiah Anderson stated in her final report that “many participants recognized that access to affordable or lower-cost housing could help them contribute their income to other aspects of their life including their health. However, with limited funds and income, this type of housing and health balance was not possible.”^{ix}

Economic Empowerment & Jobs

Many listening session participants and interviewees noted that the need for affordable housing was inextricably tied to the need for higher paying jobs in the area. Participants framed the housing crisis as a jobs crisis by extension since the level of wages does not rise to the expense of housing in the county. For example, Julius Johnson of Take Back Our Streets noted in his final report, “Residents are not making enough money to have standard living. Residents are living one paycheck away from living in a tent.”^x

Several sessions highlighted the need for affordable job training and/or education that would be feasible for job candidates to take advantage of in this economy. At least two participants noted need for truly entry-level jobs that don't require prior experience.



Residents from several distinct populations highlighted unique challenges to finding a quality job. For example, among undocumented residents, a way to earn wages without having a social security number was a high need.^{xi} And for parents across the board, not having access to childcare was a major barrier to being able to work.^{xii}

Finally, Alameda County natives who saw entrepreneurship as a more viable option outlined systemic barriers that they face when trying to start a business. For example, predatory lending can make it hard for people from disinvested communities to acquire and maintain a healthy line of credit. The competitive real estate market impacts their ability to own land.^{xiii} And there was a collective desire for more education, training and mentorship opportunities for native residents who set out to start their own private or cooperative businesses.^{xiv}

Early Care and Education

There is a consensus among listening session participants that there is not enough subsidized childcare in Alameda County, and that non-subsidized childcare is too expensive for low- and middle-income families, especially those with multiple children. Parents also highlighted ways in which existing childcare was not able to meet their needs. For example, participants in several sessions mentioned the need for full-day childcare and connected it back to jobs and education opportunities.^{xv} When childcare centers only offer three hours of care per day, it makes it impossible for caregivers to have a job.^{iv} “With full-day quality childcare, more families would be able to be

employed, as well as thrive and provide for their families,” according to Tasha Buffin, Ashland resident and community leader.^{xvi}

For middle class families, the situation was just as dire. For example, Alyssa Villanueva from Afrikan Black Coalition detailed how listening session participants who are not considered the most vulnerable also struggle to find child care^{xvii}:

One participant did not qualify for many of the commonly used programs in the County because her income was too high but could not afford to pay full cost of child care for her four children. This seemed an urgent point to highlight because in many instances government services are focused on the most needy, but that strict focus can limit and strain others who fall slightly above the income qualifications.”

Healthy Food Access

Across listening sessions, participants expressed a desire to eat healthy and described challenges that make it difficult to do so consistently.

At the top of the list of barriers to eating healthy were both cost and access. The high cost of living in Alameda County creates a domino effect for many residents; struggling to pay for housing means that they have less money to spend on healthier food items, which often cost more.^{xix}

Also, access to fresh, healthy produce and quality meats is limited for anyone who doesn’t own a car. Some participants talked about the challenge of getting to the nearest grocery store on public transit. For example, at a Spiral Gardens community listening session, one resident explained, “Using the bus to go to the nearest grocery store that is 2.5 miles away from my house would take me an hour to get to.”^{xviii} And for residents who actually can reasonably use public transit, some of them struggle to get groceries home if they have physical disabilities and/or if they are seniors.

Variety of available foods is also a challenge. For immigrant families, a grocery store that sells culturally-appropriate ethnic food items may not be within their community for easy access. This limits their ability to eat healthfully, as they turn to shelf-stable staple items but lack fresh produce to round out their diets. For example, at the Korean Community Center of the East Bay, participants noted that they are sustained by a diet of high-sodium soups, rice and kimchi, but they wanted to eat more vegetables.^{xix} Similarly, people who rely on herbs and food supplements as a part of their regular routine said that they wished these essential items were covered by their SNAP benefits.

Lastly, there were several systems issues that listening session participants shared from their perspectives as residents and consumers. In multiple listening sessions, residents said that well-meaning programs that distribute free food often give them rotting produce and/or expired food.

Those who were not fluent in English expressed a desire to have ESL classes tailored to helping them read nutrition labels so that they could make healthier choices when purchasing food. And residents who had SNAP benefits spoke about how difficult it is to check their balances sometimes because of technological glitches with the online portal they use.

Solutions

Overall, what we learned from these listening sessions is that there are recurring barriers that impact our communities' access to everything they need to survive. The cost of housing creates a domino effect in which everything is too expensive—down to diapers and food. Also, for undocumented community members, not having a social security number affects their access to everything—jobs, child care, public benefits, etc.

Despite these challenges, however, we also learned that listening session participants were eager about creating solutions. Based on their lived experience and innovative mindsets, they came up with the following list of ideas to help address and end poverty.

Housing & Homelessness

- More short-term and long-term housing options for vulnerable populations, including people with developmental disabilities, people with behavioral health needs and people recovering from substance abuse.
- Public education about renters' rights in multiple languages.
- Maintained facilities for unsheltered people to shower.
- Pre-routed public transportation to help unsheltered individuals reach spread out homeless services.
- More housing construction.
- Rent control.

Early Care & Education

- More affordable, quality, full-time child care.

Economic & Community Empowerment

- Public education about workers' rights.
- Education and training for aspiring entrepreneurs.
- More entry-level jobs.
- Financial investments from banks and local government agencies for aspiring entrepreneurs.
- More public funding for grassroots organizations who are familiar with the needs of their communities.

Healthy Food Access

- An increase in farmers markets and community-based vendors of healthy food.
- Community gardens in vacant lots.
- Public policies that would prevent the clustering of unhealthy food retail in marginalized communities.

Next steps

On Thursday, May 31, ALL IN convened its 2018 listening session grantees and community stakeholders to begin planning a more coordinated response to some of these ideas. After assessing the capacity of community members, ALL IN and our partners, we aim to work with trusted community leaders in our network to further analyze these suggestions and create a plan to raise resources to implement them. Our next steps include a three-point strategy to carry forward the vision from these listening sessions and integrate it into our existing work:

1. **Community Initiatives Cohort:** We are going to evaluate the potential of creating a working group that will explore opportunities to act upon listening session solutions.
2. **Neighborhood Transformation Learning Group:** ALL IN will invite attendees to participate in the process of documenting what we learn about authentic government-community relationship building as a part of ALL IN's Neighborhood Transformation work, beginning in the San Antonio district of Oakland.
3. **ALL IN as stewards of community engagement:** ALL IN will create a toolkit and workshop for county agencies who wish to use the ALL IN listening sessions framework for their own departments.

If you are interested in being a part of this larger effort, please contact Brittany Carter, Director of Community Engagement for ALL IN at brittaney.carter@acgov.org.

And please stay tuned for more news about how you can get involved with ALL IN by visiting our website at allin.acgov.org.

2018 ALL IN Listening Session Grantees

Thank you to all of the individuals, community groups and organizations who held ALL IN Community Listening Sessions this year:

- A-1 Community Housing Services
- Afghan Coalition
- Afrikan Black Coalition
- Alameda County Health Care for the Homeless
- Alternatives in Action
- Ask Sandra
- Berkeley Youth Alternatives
- Cirilo Hardin
- East Bay Parents Housing Network
- East Oakland Collective
- Global Communication Education & Art (GCEA)
- In-advance/Sugar Freedom Project
- Janevette Cole
- Korean Community Center of the East Bay
- La Familia
- Misha Fifer
- Mujeres Unidas y Activas
- Narro
- Preventative Care Pathways
- Rakiah Anderson
- Repaired Nations
- Resilient Wellness
- Resources for Community Development
- Roots Community Clinic
- Satellite Affordable Housing Associates
- Shauntae Velasquez
- Spiral Gardens Community Food Security Project
- Street Level Health Project
- Take Back Our Streets TBOS
- The BIZ Stoop
- The GET FREE Project
- The Men Touring Project

End Notes

ⁱ <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/alameda-county-ca/>

ⁱⁱ Hardin, Cirilo. Final Report. "Cirilo Hardin."

ⁱⁱⁱ Cole, Janevette. Final Report. "Janevette Cole."

^{iv} Falicov, Yael. Final Report. "Mujeres Unidas y Activas."

^v Yihdego, Almaz. Final Report. "Global Communication Education & Art."

^{vi} Rivera, Nancy. Final Report. "A-1 Community Housing."

^{vii} Modersbach, David. Final Report. "Alameda County Health Care for the Homeless."

^{viii} Reed, Charles. Final Report. "Roots Community Health Center."

^{ix} Anderson, Rakiah. Final Report. "Rakiah Anderson."

^x Johnson, Julius. Final Report. "Take Back Our Streets."

^{xi} Chow, Emily. Final Report. "Alternatives In Action."

^{xii} Mosier, Hang. Final Report. "Satellite Affordable Housing Associates."

^{xiii} Price, Marquita. Final Report. "East Oakland Collective."

^{xiv} Clayton, Frank. Final Report. "The Men Touring Project."

^{xv} Casanova, Elsa. Final Report. "La Familia."

^{xvi} Buffin, Tasha. Final Report. "Resources for Community Development."

^{xvii} Villanueva, Alyssa. Final Report. "Afrikan Black Coalition."

^{xviii} Flores, Panta. Final Report. "Spiral Gardens Community Food Project"

^{xix} Kim, Christin. Final Report. "Korean Community Center of the East Bay."