



HOUSING BARRIERS REPORT 2015

GOVERNOR'S COUNCIL ON DISABILITIES & SPECIAL EDUCATION



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SUMMARY

In early 2015, the Alaska Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education (the Council) partnered with Stone Soup Group (SSG) to learn more about housing barriers for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Focus groups, interviews, public testimony, and electronic survey results indicated that people with significant disabilities have trouble affording accessible and appropriate housing in the state of Alaska. Lack of desirable housing was reported as a substantial barrier, as was cost of available housing options. Results also reveal that Alaskans need more access to information about housing availability in their communities and programs that make housing more affordable. Respondents also have several suggestions, such as giving incentives to construction companies for greater use of universal design. Some people reported experiencing discrimination and suggested increasing and improving training to property managers and landlords on Fair Housing laws and reasonable accommodations. Others sought expanded programs and information regarding employment of people with disabilities and accessible public transportation to addressing the housing situation. Lastly, respondents asked for an expansion of Housing First programs for people who may experience homelessness.

METHODS

In March 2015, SSG and the Council embarked on focus groups, interviews, and surveys to help gather information about housing barriers faced by people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in Alaska. As our initial data gathering strategy, data from focus groups and interviews (semi-structured interview guide provided in Appendix I) helped us to craft the quantitative survey instrument. The qualitative data gathered via focus groups and interviews also served to provide us with richness and sociocultural context with which to understand our results. One focus group was held at SSG in Anchorage on Saturday, March 21 at noon and the other was held on Friday, March 27 at 6pm at the same location. Two key informant interviews were also conducted by the executive director of SSG in late March. Qualitative data

"I have a Section 8 voucher to help with housing costs, but landlords don't like renting or leasing to low-income people. So I am limited to sub-standard housing for my needs in a dangerous location. How can we change that?" – *Survey respondent*

"My SS & Public Assistance equals \$850 month. My rent is \$ 1,100. My family pays all rent and for all my food. I am 32 years old, so my parents will never have any retirement funds - EVER. I am the reason. How would that make you feel?" – *Survey respondent*

were analyzed for themes and utilized in the creation of an electronic survey instrument for statewide distribution.

The survey (Appendix II) was created by the research analyst at the Council and disseminated from April 7 – 21, 2015. This survey went out to all subscribers to the Council’s email list (2,504 people), was posted on Facebook (viewed by more than 165 people) and our website, and shared electronically around the community via partner organizations. A total of 241 people took the online survey. Quantitative data were analyzed with descriptive statistics to yield frequency percentages of answer responses.

Additionally, the Council has heard public testimony at our Anchorage Council meetings over the past year related to housing difficulties for people with disabilities. On October 1, 2014 we held a community forum/public testimony event focusing on housing. On May 5, 2015 we heard more public testimony on housing issues. Transcripts from these testimonies were also analyzed and results are included in this report.

Lastly, several important results from two Alaska housing impediments projects were utilized for this report. The municipality of Anchorage’s “2015 Analysis of Impediments to Fair Housing” and Alaska Housing Finance Corporation’s (AHFC) statewide “2015 Fair Housing Survey: Final Report” were both used to identify trends and further recommendations. Our triangulated data coupled with these published reports presents a clearer picture of the housing barriers faced by Alaskans with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This report concludes with several recommendations based on these data sources.

Study Limitations

It must be stated that the interview and survey results presented below are not representative of all Alaskan residents. The interviews and focus groups contain data from a very small sample size and focused on transition age youth or the parent/guardian of a youth with an intellectual or developmental disability. These interviews and focus groups were also conducted entirely in Anchorage, which does not represent the broader issues of the state. Participants were recruited through word-of-mouth and fliers from SSG, a parent support organization. Therefore, these participants were likely subject to volunteer bias and to be more active and connected to support in Alaska’s largest city, when compared to the rest of the state. Additionally, our survey was taken by a non-random, convenience sample of people with disabilities or family members of individuals with disabilities. It was administered through social media, websites, and word-of-mouth, so there is likely a large segment of the population who did not have the opportunity to participate.

Lastly, the community forum/public testimony event from our October 2014 Council meeting was held in Anchorage, so there is geographic bias in that data source. Although we have teleconference technologies that enable remote participation, this service is rarely utilized by the general public.

However, when these data are viewed in conjunction with other research reports from AHFC and the municipality of Anchorage, these results corroborate those found in more rigorous methodologies. This report allows for an important glimpse into the lives of people with disabilities struggling to obtain and keep independent housing.

RESULTS

Interviews and Focus Groups

A total of 4 transition-aged youth with intellectual disabilities participated in focus groups or phone interviews in Anchorage. An additional 2 participants were separately interviewed who had children with intellectual or developmental disabilities.^{*} These qualitative data yielded two recurrent themes: although individuals with disabilities greatly desire independent living, their parents/ guardians are much more apprehensive of the prospect of independent living, and that there are several gaps in the service delivery system that could improve supportive housing in Alaska.

PARENTS AS BARRIERS

Although all 4 youth believed strongly that they would learn new skills and be able to take care of themselves on their own, the 2 parent respondents did not necessarily agree. In the first focus group, 3 youth discussed at length the benefits of getting to live independently, however, only one of them was currently doing so. The other 2 youth in that focus group were still living at home with family members that were unsupportive of the idea of independent living. These 2 males indicated that their parents doubted they could live on their own because they lacked hygiene and medication management. One youth, Benjamin,[†] stated that he thought his mother's concern over his medication was unfounded and that he could easily live on his own. When probed about how often he takes his medications he admitted that he is often not able to remember to do this without assistance. Then, he amended his statement to indicate that he could live independently but would need support staff to help him remember to take his meds. This youth did not qualify for Home and Community-Based Services (HCBS waiver) and reported receiving low disability benefits, so it is likely that he or his family would have to pay out-of-pocket for such supportive housing assistance.

The other youth, Leonard, said that his family was constantly thwarting his efforts to find independent housing, stating that they needed his additional disability payments and income to support the household. They bolstered their arguments by telling him that "he can't do things, cannot cook," and wouldn't be safe, "that people and strangers would take advantage of me." Although this familial anxiety may or may not be warranted (Leonard had been suicidal in the past), it resulted in Leonard frequently giving up his housing searches.

During a one-on-one interview with a mother of a son with Down Syndrome, she expressed extreme frustration with the difficulty she faced finding appropriate housing for her son. It had taken her a year to find a group home (assisted living home, or ALH) that seemed appropriate for his needs, only to discover months later that the housing situation was not working out. She complained of unusual feeding and nutrition practices, lack of enrichment activities that the home was paid to provide, verbally abusive behaviors, and segregation within the house that left her son in the basement. Her initial discussions with the family that owned the house ended in frustrating arguments so she felt it was best to just bring him home. She is now very apprehensive about trying any other kind of housing situation for him as a result of these experiences, due to doubt that ALH staff are

^{*} None of the youth or parents interviewed for this study were related to each other.

[†] Names of respondents have been changed to protect their anonymity.

properly trained or qualified. She is not currently considering independent housing for him at all, even though he said he “wants nothing more” than to have his own place again.

GAPS IN THE SERVICE DELIVERY SYSTEM

A commonly cited gap in the system is that affordable housing is difficult to find if you do not know where or how to look for it. Leonard stated that he did not trust local developmental disability (DD) provider agency staff to help him find independent housing. He deftly recognized a conflict of interest in care coordinators working for agencies that had no real incentive to help find independent housing because the agency actually benefits from providing housing themselves. He expressed frustration in trying to find housing on Craigslist and other internet searches, because you “don’t know what you’re getting into,” with regards to the roommate situation. Finding his own place was not an option because apartments are so expensive and he stated that landlords do not want to accept housing vouchers.

Another systemic gap is the lack of supportive housing and DD services in rural Alaska. Alberta was the only youth in the focus group that actually had independent housing. She experiences significant functional limitations due to Fetal Alcohol Syndrome which forced her out of her home village. She told us that she had to move to Anchorage, somewhat against her will, to receive supportive housing and other services that are not available in rural Alaska. Although she currently had a roommate that she tolerated, she spoke frequently of wanting to return to her village and live in her family home. This was not a possibility to return, even though she reporting “hating” life in the city and had run away from several previous group home and other placements in Anchorage.

A third gap in the system mentioned in focus groups and interviews is the lack of transition services for youth exiting school. A parent of a 17-year-old son with Autism told us that although independence was a goal for her and her son, she was very worried about how to make this happen for him. This mother indicated that all of her son’s services have been delivered through the school system, so the family was concerned about what transition supports would be available to him after high school. Although she was talking about the importance of independent housing for her son, she did not indicate that they were actually making any plans yet. She stated that he would be in high school until age 22, then hoped for the “Tapestry program at UAA,[‡] then find a job, then housing,” making her son approximately 27 when he was ready for housing. This mother echoed the sentiments of Leonard’s family that his safety was a primary concern, as other people were likely to take advantage of him.

The lack of accessible housing, even in large cities like Anchorage, continues to be a barrier to independent housing. In an interview, an adult with a significant disability, Robert, told us he had independent housing now, but it was not fully accessible to him. He had lived with his parents, in a group home, and in his own apartment recently. In order to find his own apartment that was affordable, he had to live in dangerous neighborhoods in the past. When he decided to move to a safer neighborhood, he had to settle for a place that was not fully accessible to him. He had trouble finding housing that was accessible, in a safe location, and affordable, reporting similar difficulties to Leonard about finding landlords to accept housing vouchers.

[‡] This program offers postsecondary transition to students ages 18-21 with intellectual disabilities into a college setting, <http://www.uaa.alaska.edu/centerforhumandevlopment/tapestry/>. However, his mother may not have realized that her son might be too old to qualify for this program by the time he graduated high school, further indicating a lack of concrete planning for her transition-aged son.

PARTICIPANTS' RECOMMENDATIONS

All interviewees also expressed concern over the lack of appropriate, affordable housing and their inability to find such housing options. Benjamin suggested a phone app that would enable him to search for all available, accessible, and affordable housing in Alaska. This suggestion is a disability-accessible phone application version of the accessible housing registries currently in use in a few other states (e.g. MA, VA, etc). Leonard suggested an accessible housing fair that would allow people with disabilities to easily find information on housing assistance and available housing in the community, even getting to meet potential landlords and property managers who would accept vouchers and learn to understand their resident's needs. Robert suggested making it easier for landlords to use and accept AHFC housing vouchers. He suggests making the paperwork less complicated or making housing payments directly to the recipient, who would be responsible for using those payments for rent. He also suggested further training for landlords and property managers on disabilities and accommodations.

Public Testimony

On October 1, 2014 the Council held a community forum/public testimony event that focused on housing barriers for people with disabilities. We had several community members in Anchorage testify to the challenges they have seen or experienced.

HOUSING STOCK IS NOT ACCESSIBLE

A staff member from the Anchorage Senior Activity Center testified that she receives a lot of walk-ins and calls from people that are in need of accessible housing. She spoke of one woman with five children that was homeless because she could not find affordable, accessible housing. She was staying in a hotel but called the senior center several times in order to find information or resources on how to locate accessible housing. The staff member sent her to some assisted living homes but found that it would be a year-long process to receive a placement, which correlates with information we had gleaned from a mother in our interviews (above). The Senior Center staff tend to send such questions to the Aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs) but wish that they had more information that they could share with their clients because they are not sure that people are getting what they need from the ADRCs.

A staff member at Access Alaska spoke about trouble with landlords taking advantage of people with disabilities. She shared a story of a boy being made to clean up the landlord's yard and another story of a resident getting a roommate to help pay her rent but being evicted for doing so. She said that AHFC staff act as advocates for people, and these two incidents occurred because there was no one making sure these individuals did not get taken advantage of.

Another staff member of Access Alaska agreed, indicating his frustration is that the new housing stock in Anchorage is not accessible. He indicated that he is often asked to write letters of support for the housing development folks so they receive tax credit deals with AHFC. He felt frustrated that the public is not insisting on accessible features in apartment complexes, especially those built with public funds. He is no longer writing such

letters of support unless a significant percentage of the units are accessible. He believes that 10% of accessible units is not enough because all units need visit-ability. He said,

“So we’re building stuff that people aren’t going to be able to age in place. We’re building apartments that are really going to create tremendous problems for us in the future as people age and they are unable to live in that apartment any longer... and we really can do better.”

He concluded his testimony by encouraging the public to demand universal design in all new construction.

A member of the public, Doug, uses a wheelchair and indicates that he “can’t ever find anything as far as housing in Anchorage.” He reported that he had to move out to the Mat-Su Valley to get affordable housing. This affordable unit is farther away from the city than is ideal, and the unit is not accessible to him. Doug has to crawl up the stairs to access his own home, just like Robert mentioned in his interview (above). He expressed frustration in trying to find help getting ramps installed. He did not know where to start looking for resources that could assist him.

LACK OF SUPPORTIVE HOUSING SERVICES

Although our community forum/public testimony event on May 5, 2015 was not focused on housing, we had additional testimony relevant to this report. A landlord and her husband, Mary and John, spoke about two of their tenants who could not access supportive housing services that they needed to live independently. They have a 20-unit rental property in Anchorage and rented one unit to a married couple for 10 years who experienced intellectual disabilities. The couple receives a voucher for their housing, but every year they failed the inspection due to the conditions of their apartment. The residents had a lot of trouble taking care of themselves and seem to have no staff to support their independent housing. The landlords have helped wherever they could in the past, and even called Adult Protective Services to come investigate and help them out, but nothing came of this complaint. Mary said that recently her tenant was hospitalized for a knee replacement surgery. The landlords were notified as emergency contacts and expressed to the hospital that they should not send her home as there was no one able to care for her at home. John said to the doctor, “you can’t send her home, she’ll die. There is nowhere for her to recover in her apartment because it is so dirty. Her husband has an intellectual disability, so he’s not able to properly care for her either or follow after-care instructions.” The doctor said that he would not send her home, but after a short stay in the hospital she was sent home. Mary tearfully reported in her testimony that she died the next day after she was released.

Mary and Doug felt their story was important to share because there is a huge gap in the service delivery system for those that are not on waivers but need significant help living independently. There was no staff and no support systems checking in on them. When serious injury struck, there was no safe place to recover. When Mary and Doug tried to call agencies and find available resources, they felt they were left empty-handed.

ACCESSIBLE TRANSPORTATION AND HOUSING

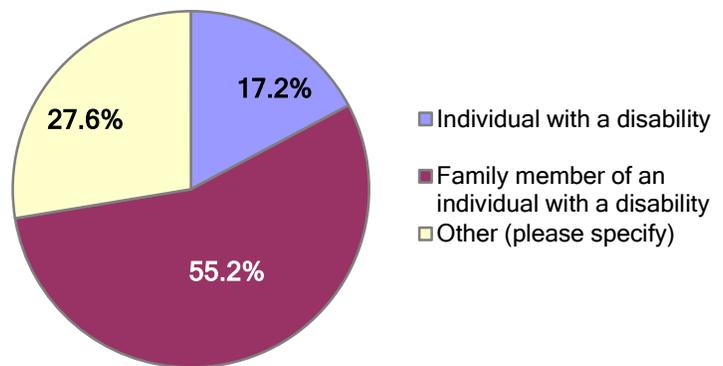
A board member at the Anchorage Senior Activity Center also spoke to the immense need for accessible housing due to the growing aging population. Her work with veterans has made it very clear to her that there is a severe shortage of housing that fits the needs of Alaska's residents. She said that an important aspect related to housing is the linkage to accessible transportation. Seniors and people with disabilities have some access to medical transportation, but she stressed that we must not forget about the importance of non-medical transportation for socialization of our aging population. She told a story of a 96-year-old woman who just gave up her driver's license this year, although she probably should have done so 10 years ago. She held it so long because there was no other way for her to get around. This staff member had spent all day taking this elder around town to where she needed to go, because she could not find affordable, accessible, non-medical transportation to see her family, friends, and run her errands. She suggests that an important aspect of housing to remember is that it be not just accessible and affordable, but connected to the greater community.

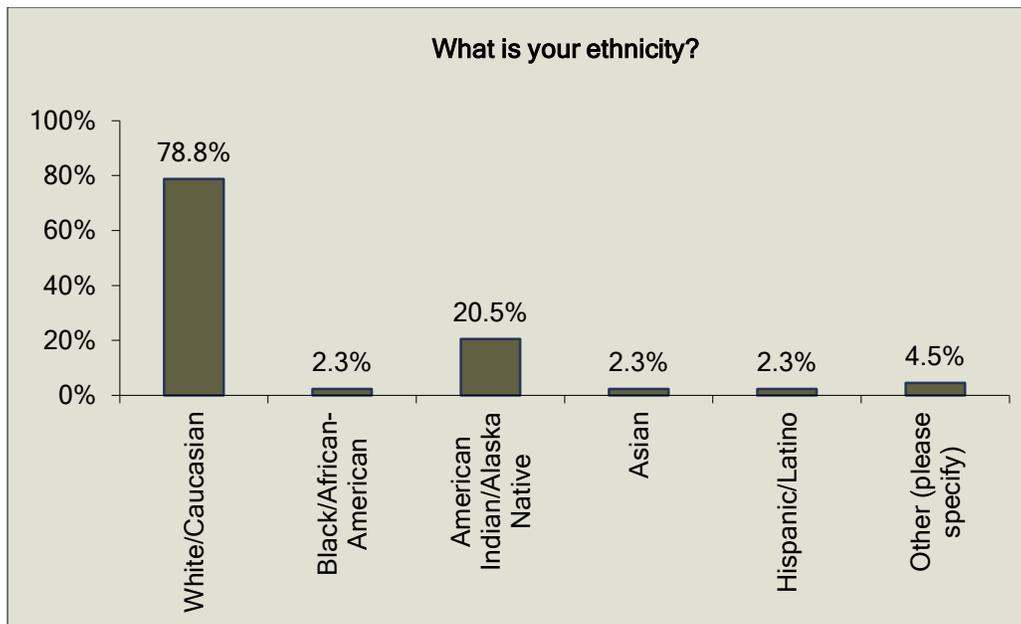
Surveys

Of the 241 respondents to take the electronic survey, most people were the family member of a person with a disability (n = 132), followed by 66 respondents who chose "other," and 41 respondents who were individuals with a disability. The write-in responses for "other" included 39 professionals that work with people with disabilities for their jobs (such as care coordinators, non-profit agencies, state agency administrators), 9 primary caregivers or guardians of people with disabilities, 6

respondents reporting both having a disability and family members with disabilities, 2 individuals who had friends with a disability, and one person who reported no disabilities nor family members with disabilities. Since this survey was designed for people with disabilities and their family members, the analyses below exclude those who did not answer this question as an individual with a disability or as a family member of a person with disabilities. This is because it is impossible to know how these care coordinators and "other" professionals answered the survey; as themselves from their own perspectives or on behalf of their clients with disabilities.

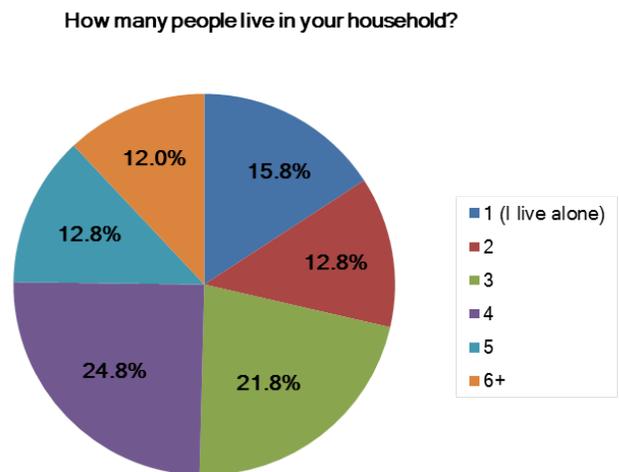
Please check the category that best describes you:





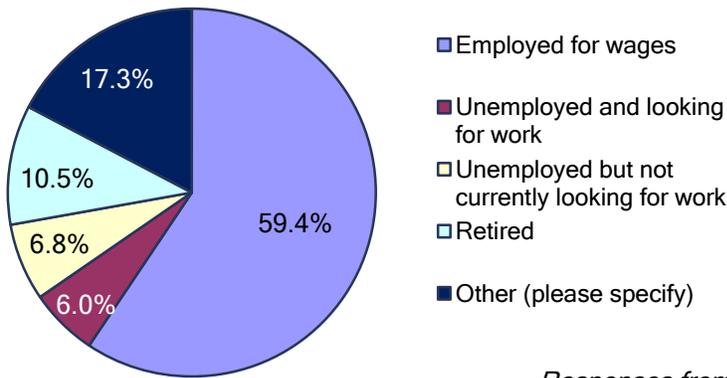
The ethnic make-up of survey respondents with disabilities or their family members was mostly Caucasian/white (n = 104), followed by Alaska Native (n = 27), “other” (n = 6), African American/black (n = 3), Asian (n = 3), and Hispanic (n = 3). Those who chose “other” reported being of mixed ethnicity.

Most people came from larger families; nearly half of all respondents (n = 66) reported living in families of 4 or more people. Thirty-eight respondents, 29%, live in 1 or 2 person households (right). This finding may suggest that supported housing settings and programs for people with disabilities should take larger family size into consideration. Because life with disabilities can be isolating, many people may choose to live with family members to retain social connections and strong family ties. This phenomenon is mirrored in the senior population, where spending the later years of life living with family members may be preferable to living alone (IFAS 2010). Additionally, ethnic minority populations tend to value living in larger family units than their Caucasian/white counterparts (Rogers 2002).



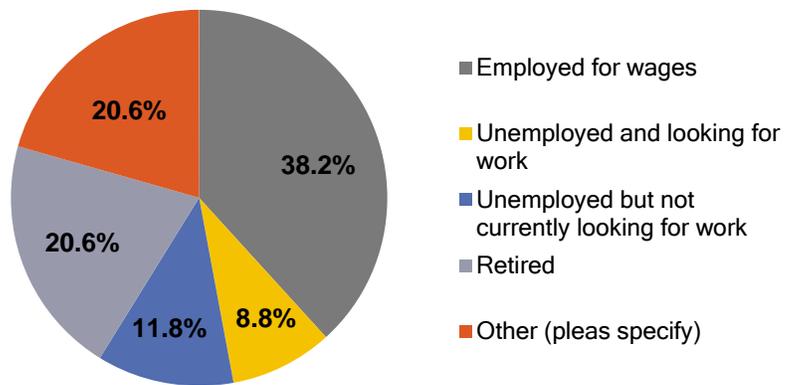
Most respondents, nearly 60%, reported being employed for wages (n = 79, graph below). Twenty-three respondents reported “other” as their employment status. Twelve of these individuals elaborated that they were “too disabled to work,” also reporting Social Security Income payments. Two individuals reported SSI in addition to part-time or vocational work, 2 people were retired, and one person was a homemaker.

What is your current employment status?
Individuals with disabilities and family member responses
 N = 133



Since these data include the family members of individuals with disabilities, the chart at left may over-represent those who are employed. If only responses from individuals with disabilities are analyzed, then the rate of employment drops to 13 out of 34 individual (below).

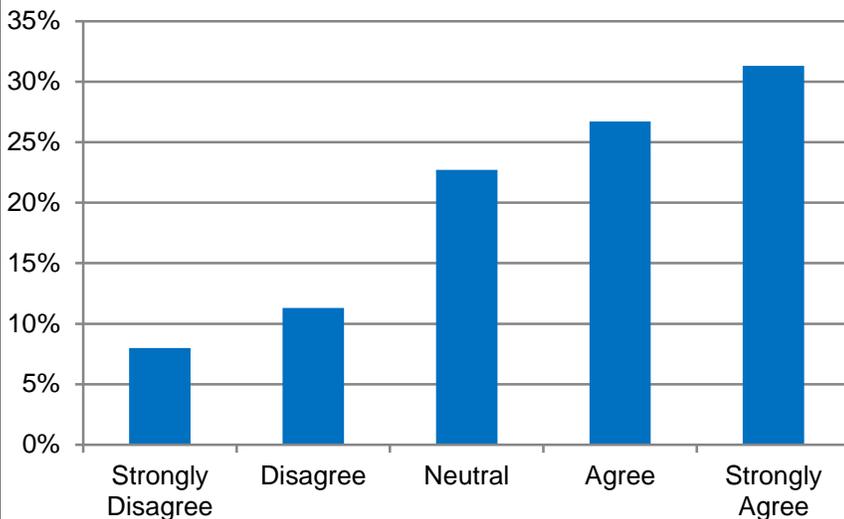
Responses from individuals with disabilities only
 N = 34



Although our survey did not ask about household income, AHFC's statewide survey found a correlation between lower incomes and the presence of a disabled member of the family (McDowell Group 2015:7).

My household has disability needs which most housing does not meet (i.e. accessibility, etc.).

A majority of respondents with disabilities or their family members indicated that they have accessibility needs



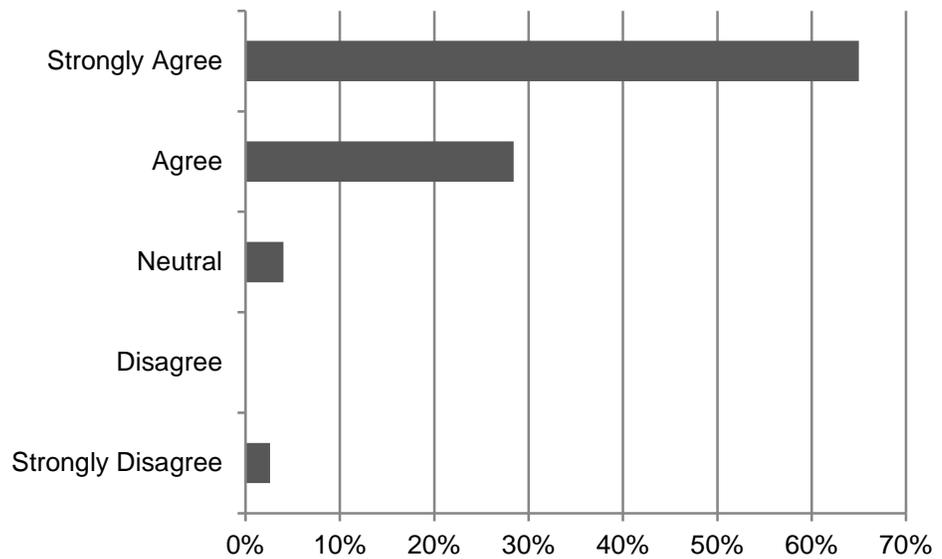
that most housing does not meet (n = 87, or 58% chose agree or strongly agree).

This is also reflected in AHFC's statewide survey, where 23% of respondents indicated that someone in their household had a disability. These respondents also indicated that it was more difficult for them to find adequate housing because of their disability status (McDowell Group 2015:7). Their most commonly cited challenges (67%) are physical barriers like stairs, bathrooms, and other household features (McDowell Group 2015:8).

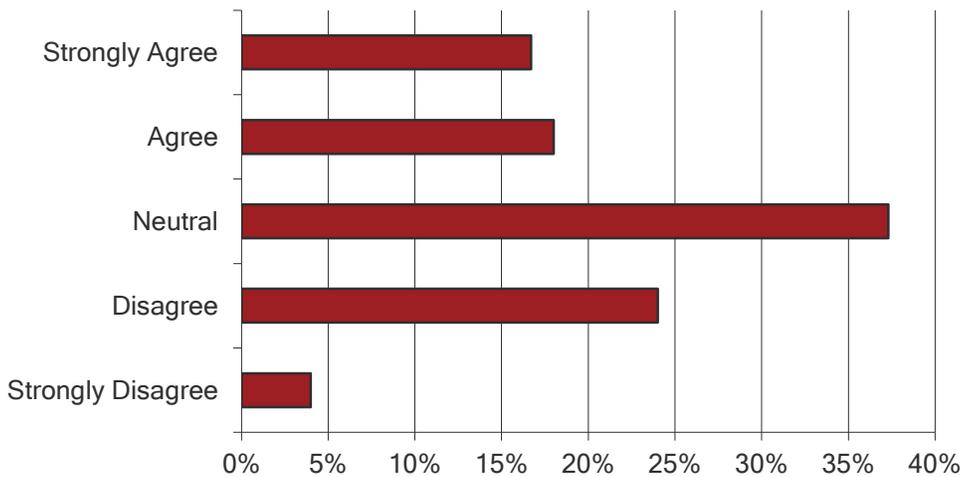
Independent housing for people with disabilities is important to me and/or my household.

The survey respondents also overwhelmingly agreed (93%) that they believed independent housing was important for people with disabilities (n = 141, who chose agree or strongly agree). Of the 10 outliers, 6 respondents chose neutral; 3 of them were individuals with disabilities, and 3 were family members of individuals with disabilities. The remaining

outliers included 4 respondents who strongly disagreed with this statement; 2 were family members, 1 was an individual with a disability, and 1 identified as both having a disability and having a family member with a disability.



There is no information on housing assistance offered by the city/town/village where I live.

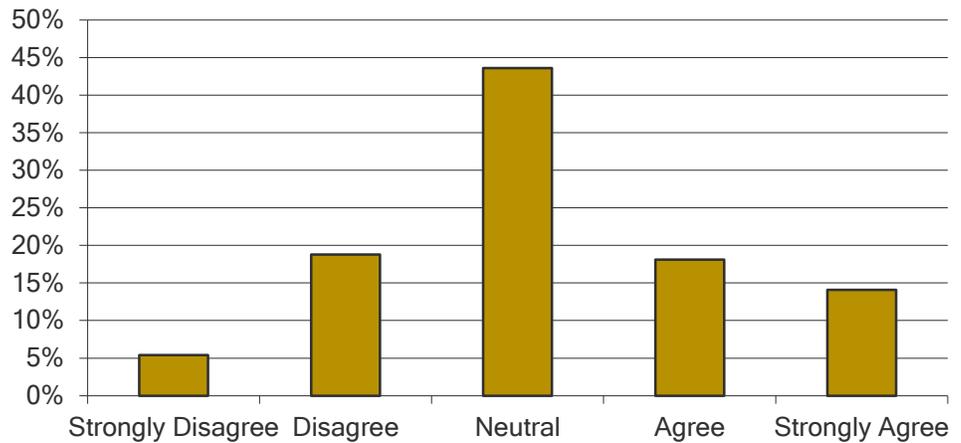


Results were more mixed when asked about availability of housing assistance information in their communities. Thirty-five percent of respondents indicated that there was no information about housing assistance available in their communities (n = 52, who chose agree or strongly agree). Most participants were unsure if information

was available to them (n = 56 who chose neutral) or disagreed with the statement (28%, n = 42). The ambiguity of the data in this survey question suggest that people do not know how or where to get such information. Increasing housing assistance programs that are available to people, in addition to widely advertising information about such programs, would benefit Alaskans throughout the state.

I, or my family member, experience discrimination when looking for accessible housing.

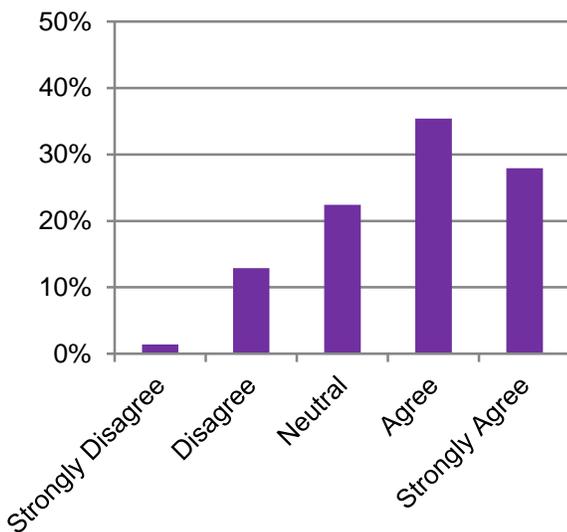
Most people were unsure if they had experienced discrimination in their past housing searches, where nearly 44% of respondents (n = 65) answered neutral. Twenty four percent (n = 36 who chose disagree or strongly disagree) responded that they had not recognized any discrimination while 32%



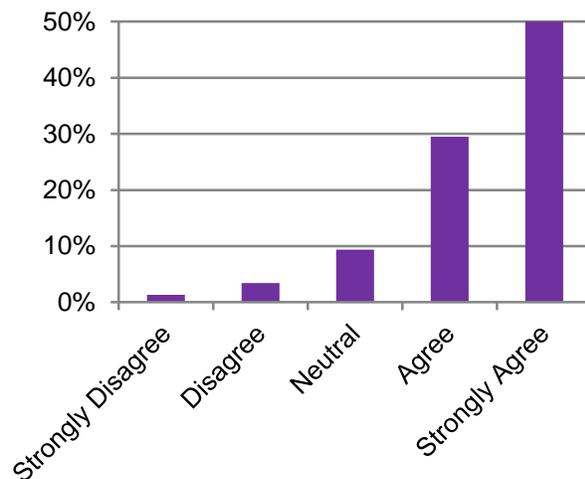
believed that they had experienced some form of discrimination in the past (n = 48 who chose agree or strongly agree). The Anchorage Equal Rights Commission reports that between 2007-2015, 24% of housing complaints received were regarding disability discrimination (Fison & Associates 2015: 24). In contrast, AHFC’s survey reports that only 4% of property managers believed that this type of discrimination happens. The larger problem here may be that most people in the AHFC survey (52%) do not know who to contact if they do experience discrimination (McDowell Group 2015:13). This is also reflected in Anchorage’s fair housing report, where it is estimated that many cases of fair housing discrimination have occurred in the state but were not reported (Fison & Associates 2015: 23).

The biggest problem for people with disabilities is finding:

accessible housing

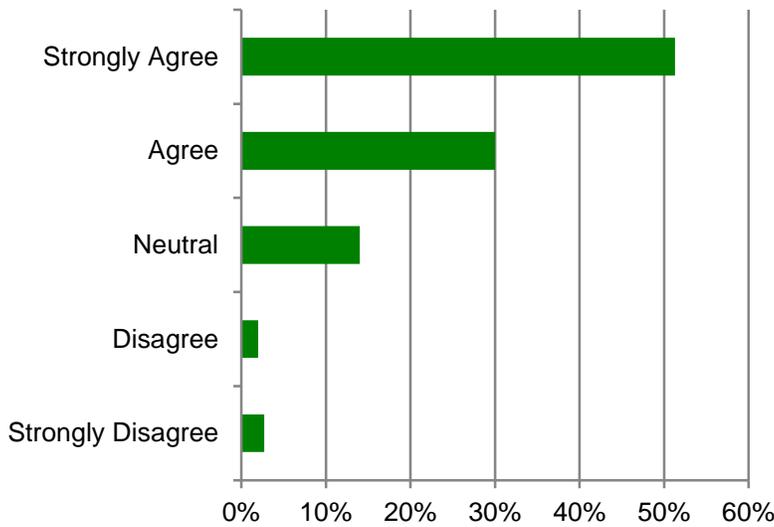


affordable housing



Most participants agreed that accessible housing and affordable housing were major challenges to people with disabilities. Sixty-three percent (n = 93) believe that finding accessible housing is the biggest problem while 86% (n = 128) stated that finding affordable housing was the biggest problem. This is also reflected in AHFC's statewide housing survey, where 43% of respondents reported affordability is the biggest barrier to finding a home (McDowell Group 2015:6).

I/we do not want to move out of the area for appropriate housing.



Respondents also agreed that they wished to remain in their communities, with 81% (n = 122) indicating that they do not want to move out of the area to find appropriate housing. This creates a difficult situation, where housing stock is low in most areas of Alaska, driving up costs. Additionally, much of the current housing stock is not accessible, making costly upgrades a necessity.

The majority of respondents (n = 99) pay over \$1000/month for their current housing (below).

How much do you pay per month for your current living situation?		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Zero (I do not pay for my current housing)	4.9%	8
\$1 - \$399 per month	7.9%	13
\$400 - \$499 per month	6.1%	10
\$500 - \$599 per month	3.7%	6
\$600 - \$699 per month	3.7%	6
\$700-\$799 per month	4.3%	7
\$800 - \$899 per month	4.9%	8
\$900 - \$999 per month	4.3%	7
\$1000+ per month	60.4%	99
answered question		164

This is not surprising, considering the latest results from the National Low Income Housing Coalition (NLIHC) indicate that Alaska has the 9th highest housing costs in the country, requiring an hourly wage of \$22.55 to cover a 2-bedroom apartment. At minimum wage, an individual would have to work 79 hours per week to afford a 1-bedroom apartment (NLIHC 2015). The NLIHC report does not take the neighborhood safety or location of housing into consideration, which also drive up costs even further.

Although all of the above survey questions excluded people who did not have disabilities or family members with disabilities, the below question included all respondents. This is because care coordinators and other disability professionals are duly qualified to answer this question about available housing information. The results here are mixed, with a variety of responses ranging from disability service agencies, to care coordinators/support staff, to internet searching (below).

Where do people with disabilities get information about housing? (choose all that apply)		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
Family members	45.8%	82
Care coordinator / support staff	51.4%	92
School staff	14.0%	25
Friends / peers	38.0%	68
Internet searching	50.3%	90
Disability service agency	54.2%	97
Other (please specify)	14.5%	26
<i>answered question</i>		179

The majority of people who chose “other” and wrote in their own responses to the above question fell into 3 categories: “I don’t know,” medical providers, and asking strangers. Eight responses indicated that people do not know where to find housing information at all. Five respondents indicated that medical professionals, such as family doctors or therapists, are a good source of housing information. Lastly, 3 people indicate that asking advocates is the best way to go, with one respondent stating, “I ask strangers when I see caregivers out with a disabled person.” The rest of the write-in responses include inquiring at state agencies, tribal councils, and checking the newspaper.

Interestingly, family members, friends, and school staff had some of the lowest ratings as sources of housing information. Some research supports our findings that family members are not always the best source of housing information for people with intellectual or developmental disabilities. As stated above in the focus group and interview data, parents/guardians may be one of the biggest barriers for transition-aged youth to acquiring independent housing. Parents, guardians, and siblings often express doubt that their loved one who experiences a significant disability will be better off on their own (Bowey et al. 2005; Davys et al. 2014). Indeed, further research suggests that individuals living in independent housing may experience *poorer* health outcomes than when they were living at home (Braddock et al. 2011). Despite this, most research and recommendations support models of housing that are independent and fully-integrated into the broader community (AAIDD & The Arc 2015).

WRITE-IN RESPONSES

There were 2 open-ended questions on the survey where participants could tell the Council more about the barriers they, or their family members, face in accessing housing for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Responses were coded into common themes and quantified below.

What are the biggest barriers for people with disabilities in obtaining housing in Alaska?

Of the 241 people who completed the survey, 158 answered this question. Participants often wrote in responses that touched on several topic areas. Responses fell into several categories:

Response Theme	N
Affordability	91
Accessibility	39
Availability	37
Long waitlists for accessible units	10
Lack of supportive housing services	10
Lack of affordable housing information	8
Transportation problems	7
Safety	7
Difficulty obtaining housing or disability benefits	6
Discrimination	5
ALHs only accept certain diagnoses	5
Location	5
Lack of low-income housing	5
Lack of qualified ALH staff	4
Lack of rural housing & services	4
Trouble communicating with landlords/property managers/DD service providers	3
People with criminal record cannot access housing	3
Employment	2
Size of housing unit	1

The responses to this question were interesting because several new themes came up that had not been mentioned in focus groups, interviews, or public testimony. Survey respondents reminded us of the connection between housing, transportation, and employment as well as the difficulty in obtaining housing vouchers. Respondents indicated that obtaining disability benefits is difficult and cumbersome for the individual as well as pointing out the service delivery system gaps for people who do not qualify for HCBS waiver services.

One participant wrote of their struggles finding assistance for their family,

“There is virtually no supported living housing environment, even in Anchorage, for people with disabilities who also have children under the age of 18.”

Another participant pointed out the extreme cost of retrofitting accessibility features into existing housing,

“We had to build a new home for our son who is in a wheelchair because there are so few accessible homes. The cost difference of a major remodel and building a new home was marginal. It shouldn’t be this expensive.”

Several individuals indicated problems with the current state of available assisted living homes. Five individuals mentioned that ALHs are only licensed to accept individuals with certain diagnoses that excluded them or their family members. Four other individuals indicated that the training and qualifications for ALH staff were questionable and needed to be strengthened for the safety and quality of life of their residents.

If you could identify one thing to do differently, or in a better way to increase housing for people with disabilities, what would that be?

Of the 241 people who completed the survey, 146 answered this question. Most participants wrote in responses related to the topic areas already addressed in this report. For example, nearly all respondents indicated that the accessible housing stock needed to be increased and made more affordable. Participants suggested finding ways to subsidize the cost of accessible housing utilizing partners at tribal councils, department of behavioral health, adult basic education, law enforcement agencies, and regional native associations. For example, one person suggested instituting state income taxes to fund better subsidized housing options. Another person suggested, “encourage innovative collaborative relationships between tribal organizations, state, and federal agencies to promote health and safety of families with children and increase pooling of resources opportunities.”

In fact, several respondents indicated a need for family housing that is accessible and/or supported, for example, assisted living homes that could also accept the individual’s children. One individual with a disability also indicated that they wanted to live in segregated housing that was *not* integrated into the broader community, indicating that they felt uncomfortable and different when forced to live around people who do not have significant disabilities. Another participant suggested “alternative housing” and several other people wrote of their desire to see cooperative housing and intentional community opportunities for people with disabilities.

Several participants expressed a desire for increased advocacy and to reduce societal stigma surrounding disabilities. Respondents also wanted increased use of universal design in new home construction and increasing Housing First options for people at risk of homelessness. This suggestion is particularly salient as Alaska’s disabled homeless population is on the rise, and homeless shelters are ill-equipped for people with special needs (Hancock, 2015). Participants also suggested increasing accessible transportation and employment opportunities for people with disabilities. Lastly, two respondents indicated that caregivers and direct service providers (DSPs) need incentives to make a career out of this high-turnover field. If turnover is reduced, the quality of care may increase and opportunities for supportive housing service providers may also increase.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From focus groups, interviews, our housing survey, public testimony, and a review of AHFC's statewide fair housing report and the Municipality of Anchorage's housing impediments report, several recommendations are suggested for housing professionals and DD service providers for improving accessible, affordable, independent housing for the state's most vulnerable population of individuals with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities.

For Housing Professionals

INCREASE UNIVERSAL DESIGN/ACCESSIBLE HOUSING STOCK

The housing stock in Alaska is low. In Anchorage alone, the vacancy rate has fallen below the "ideal" rate of 5% and currently hovers at 3%. The municipality would need approximately 900 new units built per year, however, only 350 units are typically built annually (Fison & Associates 2015:20). The accessible housing stock is even lower. AHFC's statewide survey of rental property managers reported that nearly 40% of respondents indicated that 0% of their units were accessible or they refused to answer the question (*ibid* p. 22). Participants suggested that universal design be incentivized so that all new housing stock include accessible and visit-able features.

IMPROVE TRAINING OF HOUSING PROFESSIONALS ON FAIR HOUSING LAWS

An interesting result of AHFC's housing survey is that only 30% of property managers knew that it was illegal to discriminate against a potential renter based on their disability status. The most common responses to this open-ended question were ethnicity/race/color, then religion, followed by age (McDowell Group 2015:22). This is also a change from AHFC's 2010 data, where property managers at that time were more likely to report disability as a form of illegal discrimination rather than age (although it was still followed by ethnicity, religion, gender, and marital status). Because discrimination is happening (however underreported), participants suggested increasing and improving training of landlords and property managers on fair housing laws and how to make reasonable accommodations for a variety of disabilities.

INCREASE HOUSING ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS & INFORMATION

Participants indicated trouble finding information about housing assistance programs and that the application and approval processes were burdensome. It is recommended that housing assistance programs for people with disabilities be increased and simplified. An important feature of increasing housing assistance programs is widespread advertisement, so that people can learn about their options. An accessible housing registry, or some other centrally located source of information where participants can easily find housing that fits their needs, is also recommended. These housing assistance programs should include consideration that many people with intellectual or developmental disabilities have families of their own, or wish to one day. Housing programs for these folks should accommodate larger family size rather than one-bedroom apartments.

For The DD Service System

It must be noted, however, that increased available, accessible housing alone will not solve the problem entirely. There are several recommended changes to the DD service delivery system that should accompany changes to the housing market.

IMPROVE SERVICES AVAILABLE TO RURAL ALASKA

The Council recommends improved and increased availability of DD services in rural communities. These essential services can enable people to remain in their communities, increasing their satisfaction and quality of life. Dislocation and feelings of displacement are a common source of problems for people who are forced to seek services in Alaska's larger communities. The Council suggests greater use of telepractice to meet some of this need. Some HCBS waiver services could be delivered remotely to rural communities, however, current state of Alaska regulations prohibit HCBS services from being delivered via telepractice. If this restriction were removed, existing telepractice structures and facilities could be utilized to deliver HCBS services to rural locations. People could also be assisted to remain in their communities if grant funds are made more readily available. These DD or other supportive grant funds could help people retrofit their homes to be made more accessible in those locations where there is little to no new housing stock being constructed.

SUPPORTED HOUSING AND DIRECT SERVICE PROVIDERS

The quality and training of DSPs and ALH staff was called into question by some participants. Because DSPs are integral to supported, independent, and integrated housing for people with disabilities, we recommend incentives to strengthen their satisfaction in their jobs to reduce the high turnover in the field. DSPs should be earning a living wage, receiving health insurance and continuing education, and otherwise incentivized to enter and remain in this important service career. Improving the quality of personnel and training of staff can be facilitated by higher wages, which can give people greater reason to care about their jobs and improve their performance (IFAS 2010; Cascio 2006). If the field of DSPs increases, supported housing services could likely expand as well. The Council also recommend a consideration of alternative housing configurations, including cooperative housing for people with disabilities.

INCREASE EDUCATION & LIFE COURSE PLANNING

One of the barriers we discovered in focus group, interviews, the survey, and research was that parents and guardians were not always very supportive of the notion of independent housing for their loved one. If they were supportive of independent housing, parents were rarely planning for this transition. Therefore, we recommend increased education for parents about the ways that independent living can benefit people with disabilities. Parents need to have their concerns for health and safety alleviated by learning about all the ways their children can receive supportive housing services. Parents also need tools to begin planning and preparing their children with disabilities for independent housing throughout the life course. Children with significant disabilities may need to begin working on life skills for independent living many years before they are transition-aged, likely as a major component of their special education Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Case studies and testimonials from people with intellectual or developmental disabilities that are successfully living independently could give parents the assurances they need to begin planning for this major life event.

The Council recommends an integrated supportive housing plan that incorporates several components from housing professionals as well as those from the DD service delivery system that may result in a fundamental restructuring of the way we think of housing for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

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APPENDIX I: SEMI-STRUCTURED FOCUS GROUP / INTERVIEW PROTOCOL



Alaska LEND Without Walls

Stone Soup Group ★

Welcome and introduce the facilitators. Describe the focus group purpose, process, and structure. Remind participants that they may refuse participation at any time and are under no obligation to respond to any questions that make them feel uncomfortable. Announce that the audio tape is going to be turned on. These tapes are only for our records and will not be made public or given to anyone else.

Let participants introduce themselves to the group. Lead the group through the following topics starting with open-ended questions and using more directed, probing questions to clarify responses by group members:

1. What is the first word that comes to mind when you think of housing for people with disabilities?
2. How high of a priority is housing for people with disabilities?
3. What are the positives about housing in Alaska for people with disabilities?
4. What are the biggest barriers for people with disabilities in obtaining housing in Alaska?
5. How would you describe the housing system in Alaska?
6. How would you describe the housing system for people with disabilities?
7. Where do people with disabilities get information on housing?
8. If you could identify one thing to do differently or in a better way to increase housing for people with disabilities, what would that be?
9. Is there anything else that we should talk about related to housing?

Thank the participants for taking part in the focus group. Solicit and respond to any questions. Provide contact information should participants have any further questions at a later time. Adjourn.

Housing for People with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities

The Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education and Stone Soup Group are interested in obtaining information about housing barriers and opportunities in the state of Alaska for people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities and their families. This survey is anonymous and will take approximately 10 minutes to complete. If you have any questions regarding this survey, please contact:

Brittney Howell
Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education
1-888-269-8990 (toll free)
brittney.howell@alaska.gov

Next

Housing for People with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities

Housing Survey

1. Please check the category that best describes you:

- Individual with a disability
- Family member of an individual with a disability
- Other (please specify)

Prev

Next

Housing for People with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities

Next we would like to ask you questions regarding barriers to appropriate housing for people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities. The following are examples of barriers to housing or statements about how you might feel about housing in your community; please respond with how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

2. My household has disability needs which most housing does not meet (i.e. accessibility, etc).

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly Agree

3. Independent housing for people with disabilities is important to me and/or my household.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>				

4. There is no information on housing assistance offered by the city/town/village where I live.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>				

5. I, or my family member, experience discrimination when looking for accessible housing.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>				

6. The biggest problem for people with disabilities is finding accessible housing.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>				

7. The biggest problem for people with disabilities is finding affordable housing.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>				

8. I/we do not want to move out of the area for appropriate housing.

Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
<input type="radio"/>				

[Prev](#) [Next](#)

9. Where do people with disabilities get information about housing? (choose all that apply)

- Family members
- Care coordinator / support staff
- School staff
- Friends / peers
- Internet searching
- Disability service agency
- Other (please specify)

10. What are the biggest barriers for people with disabilities in obtaining housing in Alaska?

11. If you could identify one thing to do differently, or in a better way to increase housing for people with disabilities, what would that be?

12. Do you have other barriers to safe and affordable housing you would like to share?

Prev

Next

Housing for People with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities

13. For statistical purposes only, what is your ethnicity?

- White/Caucasian
- Black/African-American
- American Indian/Alaska Native
- Asian
- Hispanic/Latino
- Other (please specify)

14. How many people live in your household?

- 1 (I live alone)
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6+

15. How much do you pay per month for your current living situation?

- Zero (I do not pay for my current housing)
- \$1 - \$399 per month
- \$400 - \$499 per month
- \$500 - \$599 per month
- \$600 - \$699 per month
- \$700 - \$799 per month
- \$800 - \$899 per month
- \$900 - \$999 per month
- \$1000+ per month

16. What is your current employment status?

- Employed for wages
- Unemployed and looking for work
- Unemployed but not currently looking for work
- Retired
- Other (please specify)

[Prev](#) [Next](#)

Housing for People with Intellectual/Developmental Disabilities

The Governor’s Council on Disabilities and Special Education and Stone Soup Group thank you for your time!

If you have any questions regarding this survey, please contact:

Brittney Howell
Governor's Council on Disabilities and Special Education
1-888-269-8990 (toll free)
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Prev

Done

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