

Housing and Schools: Working Together to Reduce the Negative Effects of Student Mobility

A Summary from the Washington, D.C., and Baltimore Region Roundtables

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Approximately 13 percent of children under 18 move from one year to the next, and low-income children and adults move even more often (U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey 2010; Cohen and Wardrip 2011). In one 10-city study, approximately half of all low-income households moved within two years (Coulton, Theodos, and Turner 2009). Residents move for a wide variety of reasons, both positive and negative (Briggs, Comey, and Weismann 2010; Coulton et al. 2009; Frey 2009). Some positive motivations for moving include being closer to a job or being able to afford a better apartment or house. Residents also move for unplanned, negative reasons, such as problems with their landlords or creditors, financial stress, poor housing conditions, or domestic changes such as divorce. While some moves are good for families, residential instability, especially chronic mobility, can prove detrimental to children's academic outcomes. Numerous studies have shown how moving homes, especially repeatedly, can seriously affect children's lives. A new home may also mean changing schools, potentially causing adverse educational effects on children. High school instability levels can also create problems for teachers and administrators, which in turn can lead to worse outcomes for the mobile children as well as their peers.

The recent foreclosure crisis has contributed to higher residential mobility rates. To shed more light on this issue, the Open Society Foundations funded the National Neighborhood Indicators

Partnership (NNIP) to manage a research project that explored the impacts of foreclosure on student residential mobility and school switching in Baltimore, New York City, and Washington, D.C., as well as recommend several policies and strategies that would help protect residential and school mobility due to foreclosure (Comey and Pettit 2012).¹ The overarching questions for the NNIP cross-site project was whether foreclosure prompted families with children to move residences and schools more frequently than other children; and, if families did move, did they relocate to neighborhoods and schools that were any different from where they started. Researchers in Baltimore, New York, and Washington, D.C., matched individual administrative student records to foreclosure and property records to look at trends and impacts over time. (See the NNIP web site for individual site reports and methodological details: <http://www.neighborhoodindicators.org/activities/projects/effects-foreclosure-children-and-schools>.)

Researchers from the three sites shared their findings with key local stakeholders such as housing counselors and school officials. The researchers discovered that housing counselors and school officials were not aware of each other's programs and policies to assist vulnerable families with children and rarely coordinated their services. It became apparent that local stakeholders could benefit from collaborating and learning about each other's programs.



Housing and Schools Roundtables

In response, the Urban Institute held two practitioner roundtables about children's residential and school mobility as part of a Low-Income Working Families initiative looking at the impact of recession and instability on families. During the two meetings, stakeholders discussed the full spectrum of residential mobility: from chronic mobility, eviction, and foreclosure to doubled-up households and homelessness. The purposes of the roundtables were for stakeholders to learn about existing programs and policies that aim to reduce residential and student mobility across the regions, as well as to brainstorm new ways that the different organizations could work together.

The Washington, D.C., roundtable, held in October 2011, was cohosted by the Nonprofit Roundtable of Greater Washington and the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments. In January 2012, the Baltimore Neighborhoods Indicators Alliance, the Baltimore Homeownership Preservation Coalition, and the Public Justice Center cohosted the Baltimore regional roundtable. Over 35 individuals attended each session, representing local and state homeless liaisons, housing counseling services, school districts, community development agencies and organizations, nonprofit service providers, national advocacy groups, academic institutions, and funders. The organizations represented the following counties and cities: Arlington, Alexandria, Baltimore, Baltimore County, Calvert, Manassas, Montgomery, Prince George's, and Washington, D.C.

Since there is value in what we learned for those approaching the issue from a variety of backgrounds, this brief summarizes the literature and the key federal and local policies related to families with children. It then describes the themes that emerged from the roundtable conversations and offers examples of school districts, government agencies, and nonprofit housing counseling agencies working together to mitigate the negative effects of mobility.

A Review of the Impacts of Residential and School Mobility

In general, residential mobility is associated with poor outcomes for children on various measures (Audette, Algozzine, and Warden 1993; Simmons et al. 1987; Scanlon and Devine 2001). Residential moves caused by economic instability are disruptive and disorienting for

children, especially since their parents are occupied with finances and finding a new home (Tucker, Marx, and Long 1998). Disruptive or numerous residential moves are linked to children's academic problems, such as grade retention (Simpson and Fowler 1994; Wood et al. 1993), school completion (Astone and McLanahan 1994), and a lack of interpersonal skills (Simpson and Fowler 1994). Several studies have found that residential mobility is most detrimental to children when the move is reactive instead of strategic—that is, if the move is caused by some turbulence within the household, such as a loss of a job or change in family composition (Rumberger 2003; Moore, Vandivere, and Ehrle 2000). Many residential moves are, in fact, a direct result of an important change in family composition, such as a divorce (Speare and Goldscheider 1987).

The effect of switching schools on children is also well documented and is generally negative. Students who switch schools tend to have worse academic outcomes (Schwartz, Stiefel, and Chalico 2007). The negative effects are not just academic: a switch to a new school forces a student to create new relationships with peers and teachers, and it can have social and interpersonal effects (Swanson and Schneider 1999). These negative effects, especially academic ones, have been shown to be more severe for younger children (Rumberger 2003). But student turnover does not just present serious consequences for students. Schools that experience significant turnover in their student body tend to perform worse as well (Hanushek, Kain, and Rifkin 2004; Rhodes 2005), as incoming students present a challenge for teachers (Lash and Kirkpatrick 1994) and administrators (Rumberger and Thomas 2000).

Policies and Organizations Working to Minimize Residential and School Mobility

Several current policies and services help reduce children's school mobility and residential mobility for families. The McKinney-Vento Act and the Fostering Connections Act allow homeless and foster care children to attend their same school even when they move out of school attendance boundaries. In addition, nonprofit housing counseling organizations and continuums of care work to help families find stable housing, avoiding the disruption to children's social and academic development.

McKinney-Vento Act and Fostering Connections Act

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, originally passed in 1987 and reauthorized in January 2002 as part of the No Child Left Behind Act, is the primary federal legislation that helps ensure that homeless children and youth can enroll, attend, and receive similar education services as all other children in public schools. Under the McKinney-Vento Act, a student is considered homeless if he or she is “lacking a fixed, adequate, regular nighttime residence.” This definition includes children who are doubled-up with friends or relatives along with families that are in shelters or living on the streets, a more expansive definition of homeless than that used by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Under the Act, all homeless children are entitled to the following:

- Staying in their school of origin, even if the family moves outside the school boundaries, unless the parent decides it is in the best interest of the child to move schools.
- Transportation back to the original school, even if the child is now outside the district’s boundary. School districts either provide transportation directly or money for the student to travel to the school of origin.
- Immediate school enrollment, even if students do not have their records (e.g., proof of residency or immunization forms). Unaccompanied youth are entitled to enroll without their parents’ approval.
- Fee waivers, money for uniforms, extra academic support, and free meals without proof of income.

The McKinney-Vento Act requires that state education agencies uphold the Act’s policies. Each school district in turn is mandated to have a McKinney-Vento liaison to identify students who qualify and ensure they receive services. For a more extensive discussion of the Act and implementation challenges, see Cunningham, Harwood, and Hall (2010).

The Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing Adoptions Act, passed in 2008, provides many of the same services to children in foster care that the McKinney-Vento Act provides to homeless children as part of a broader reform to the federal child welfare system. The McKinney-Vento Act includes children in foster care who are awaiting placement in its definition of homelessness. The Fostering Connections Act expands protections to all children in foster care.

State child welfare and education agencies are jointly obligated to uphold the law. Under the law, the child welfare agency and the schools must work together to make sure a child can stay in his or her school of origin, when in the best interest of the child. In cases where a child needs to change schools, the destination school must provide immediate enrollment, and the school of origin must work with the child welfare agency to provide expedited record transfers.

Additional information about the McKinney-Vento Act and the Fostering Connections Act is available on these web sites:

- National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth: <http://www.naehcy.org/>
- American Bar Association Legal Center for Foster Care and Education: http://www.americanbar.org/groups/child_law/what_we_do/projects/education.html

Housing Counseling Organizations

Housing counselors typically work with low- and moderate-income homebuyers, homeowners, and renters to secure safe and affordable homes. Housing counseling organizations, which can be either nonprofit organizations or government agencies, do this through working directly with families via counseling, but they also provide training and technical assistance. Some organizations focus solely on housing or foreclosure mitigation, while others offer other services like GED classes or job training. Nonprofit credit unions sometimes also offer housing counseling alongside other banking services.

HUD-certified housing counseling organizations are eligible to receive federal grant money. To receive certification, organizations must have worked in their community providing housing counseling for at least one year, use electronic record keeping, and have been recently audited.

Some of the types of services they provide include the following:

- **Tenant rights’ education:** Housing counseling organizations can provide classes on tenants’ rights and responsibilities and community-wide education and advocacy campaigns. During the recent foreclosure crisis, some housing counseling agencies conducted targeted outreach to tenants in foreclosed rental buildings to educate them of their rights. Under the 2009 Protecting Tenants at Foreclosure Act, tenants have the right to stay

in their foreclosed unit until the end of their lease; tenants with month-to-month leases have the right to stay for at least 90 days. Some cities, including the District of Columbia, extend additional protections to tenants living in foreclosed properties.

- **Tenancy counseling:** Tenancy counseling can include budgeting and credit counseling, information on the rights and responsibilities of a tenant, general information on locating and renting an apartment, and assistance in locating and applying for affordable housing. Housing counselors can also help mediate tenant-landlord disputes.
- **Credit and budget counseling:** Financial literacy programs educate families on all aspects of money management. Counselors help families review their savings, credit, and finances and set up budget and savings plans. Counselors also focus on issues of debt and assist families to understand their credit score and how it can be improved.
- **Emergency rental assistance:** Emergency rental assistance programs help low-income families pay rental or utility arrearages that may result in eviction. Emergency rental assistance funds are a scarce resource, and demand for them usually exceeds supply.
- **Pre-purchase counseling:** Housing counselors assist families, especially first-time homebuyers, through the process of purchasing a home. Counselors meet with families and review their credit, savings and budget, explain mortgage products available to the family, and help the family understand the steps to buying a home.
- **Foreclosure prevention for homeowners:** Foreclosure counselors work with families that are dealing with mortgage default or delinquency. Counselors help families review their finances, negotiate with mortgage loan servicers, and prepare a budget for the future.

For more information about housing counseling organizations, visit the following web sites:

- Foreclosure-Response.org: <http://www.foreclosure-response.org/>
- HUD Foreclosure Counselors: <http://www.hud.gov/offices/hsg/sfh/hcc/fc/>
- Capitol Area Foreclosure Network: <http://www.capitalareaforeclosurenetwork.org/>
- Baltimore Homeownership Preservation Coalition: <http://www.preservehomeownership.org/>

Continuums of Care

Continuums of care (COCs) exist across the country to coordinate services for homeless families and to implement policies that reduce long-term residential instability. In 1995, HUD implemented a new policy that required localities to form their own COC and submit one application for McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Grants. Today HUD awards three types of funding through the COCs:

- The Supportive Housing Program provides grants for supportive housing and services to help homeless persons achieve residential stability.
- The Shelter Plus Care Program is targeted to hard-to-house homeless people with disabilities. It provides rental assistance funds to be added to outside funds for supportive services.
- The Single-Room Occupancy Program provides rental assistance payments to homeless people to live in single-room units and funds for renovating properties to add single-room units.

HUD requires that each continuum perform at least four key services: outreach and intake, emergency shelter, transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing. Beyond that, the composition of each local COC is unique. COCs can have representation from homeless shelters, food banks, social services, housing authorities, homeless service providers, and municipal government. In addition, COCs help government agencies and nonprofits provide other wrap-around services like educational assistance, job training, parenting classes, primary and mental health services, substance abuse treatment, case management, and food assistance. COCs also play an important role in educating communities about homelessness and advocating for the needs of the homeless within their community. COCs manage local Homeless Management Information Systems, which contain client-level data on users of homeless services.

For more information about continuums of care, visit these web sites:

- National Alliance to End Homelessness: <http://www.endhomelessness.org/content/article/detail/1744/>
- HUD: http://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/comm_planning/homeless/programs/coc

Themes from the Roundtables

The roundtables held in the Washington, D.C., and Baltimore regions resulted in full-day discussions about the importance of minimizing child residential and school mobility, as well as a discussion about the many different programs and partnerships that are in effect in the regions that do so. A few main points were raised in both sessions. First, parents are not aware of the negative impacts that switching schools can have on their children. Participants agreed that the overall message and supporting evidence needs to be more widely shared within their communities. Everyone also recognized that school stability may not be the first priority during the family's immediate crisis at hand, such as an emergency eviction, homelessness, or foreclosure. Another key theme was that identifying families experiencing residential instability is a major challenge for any stakeholder. Typically, a family in trouble does not reach out to the school or housing counselors for help. This reluctance to take advantage of services and legal protections could be due to the stigma associated with assistance programs or lack of awareness that they are available. For instance, doubled-up families often do not seek out the information that would let them know they qualify for McKinney-Vento services. Tenants living in properties with foreclosed landlords often do not know their rights and just leave their properties.

Other challenges that the participants discussed was that housing counseling agencies and school officials are not familiar with each other's services. Even if they know the organization, they often do not have personal contacts or know the specific person to call. Referral lists would help address this challenge, but keeping them current is an enormous challenge. Also, families usually do not discuss housing instability issues with homeless liaisons or school counselors, or school issues with housing counselors. Families only discuss their specific problems at hand, and case managers may not probe in order to refer families to receive other related services.

Housing Counseling Agencies

Housing counseling agencies are very skilled in assisting families when they have been wrongfully evicted, need first-time homeowner assistance, or need housing assistance. The recent foreclosure crisis has shifted the focus of many local housing counseling agencies to assist those homeowner families under threat of or already experiencing foreclosure, as well as families living in a rental

property that has received a foreclosure notice. During the roundtables, housing counselor participants reported the following:

- Many housing counseling agencies do not know the school district's policies relating to moving and switching schools, and they are unaware of McKinney-Vento services. They are also unaware that doubled-up children qualify for McKinney-Vento services (as they are excluded in HUD's homelessness definition). Even if housing counselors are aware of the policies, they are overwhelmed with the demand for their services and do not have time or expertise to provide broader services.
- Most housing counselors are not able to follow up with families once they receive their services and exit the program.
- With so much mobility, it can be hard to provide services targeted to a specific neighborhood. Instead, some housing counseling agencies have shifted to a citywide focus because former residents return to them no matter where they live.
- Housing counselors should reach out to join their local continuum of care.

School Districts

Most school districts have appointed homeless liaisons who are responsible for identifying students who qualify for McKinney-Vento services. These liaisons work with other agencies or non-profit organizations to help identify students in need or provide additional services. Some of the main points discussed by the school district staff included the following:

- Identifying homeless children can be a significant challenge. Some school districts rely on families self-reporting during school registration or through referrals they obtain via collaborations with community-based organizations and homeless shelters.
- Collaboration across counties is crucial because students often move across county/state lines, but the links are not strong as they could be.
- Local absenteeism or truancy reduction programs aim to identify and reach out to students having trouble, often related to family issues. Housing issues should be a standard probe for absenteeism or truancy reduction programs.
- Local school districts are building capacity of their homeless liaisons and McKinney-Vento

services. These same districts plan to have teacher trainings and intend to increase outreach and awareness in the greater community and more specifically during school enrollment.

Promising Practices of Stakeholder Collaboration

During the roundtables, stakeholders described some of their efforts to bust silos in order to reduce residential and school instability in children's lives. We followed up with representatives from four agencies in three different jurisdictions: the Prince George's County Public Schools, the District of Columbia Public Schools, the Manassas Department of Housing and Community Development, and the Manassas City Public Schools. From our conversations, we learned about the following successful collaborations between the education and housing sectors.

Homeless liaisons in Prince George's County Public Schools (PGCPS), the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), and the Manassas City Public Schools used similar methods to form collaborations with people outside their sector. These three school districts differ in size and scale of the identified homeless population. PGCPS is the second-largest school district in Maryland with 198 schools and approximately 127,000 students from prekindergarten to 12th grade. In the 2009–10 school year, the homeless education office identified roughly 2,800 homeless students in the school district (PGCPS 2010).

DCPS serves approximately 44,000 students in 139 schools. Approximately 2,200² DCPS students were identified as homeless in the 2011–12 school year. This figure does not include students attending public charter schools, which have a designated homeless liaison for each charter Local Education Agency.

Manassas is the smallest of the three school districts. In 2009–10, Manassas City Public Schools had an enrollment of approximately 7,000 students across nine schools (<http://nces.ed.gov/>). In the 2008–09 school year, 109³ Manassas students were identified as homeless.

Despite the districts' differences in size, the officials we talked to each identified three ways that they have successfully formed partnerships intended to reduce school mobility.

- The first was through education and training. In Prince George's County, the district homeless liaison provides training to a number of social service providers and community mem-

bers, including a local group of faith-based organizations. These faith-based organizations are often the first place families go when they are displaced. Providing training means these organizations will know the school homeless policies when a family comes to them for help and know how to efficiently provide them referrals. In addition, the trainings provide an opportunity for the homeless liaison to learn more about other social service providers.

- The second strategy our informants used to maintain partnerships was regularly scheduled interagency committees and working groups. In the District of Columbia the homeless liaison regularly attends meetings of the youth subcommittee of the District of Columbia Interagency Council on Homelessness. The committee meets every month with 10 to 15 representatives from local shelters, nonprofit homeless service providers, government agencies, and DCPS. The committee allows the agencies to brainstorm solutions together, keep each other abreast of upcoming issues and policy changes related to their missions, and provide information on the resources they each provide.
- Third, informal partnerships between organizations facilitated collaboration. In Manassas, a housing advocate from the Department of Housing and Community Development and the Manassas City Public School District homeless liaison work together ad hoc. When homeless families come into the housing department looking for assistance, the housing advocate refers them to the school homeless liaison, who can then advocate for the family in the schools. When the school homeless liaison discovers a family facing housing instability, she refers the family to the housing advocate, who can then connect the family with housing resources the schools are not able to provide.

The representatives shared that establishing their partnerships takes time and effort. Time management can be challenging. Stakeholders would like more time to attend trainings and committee and working group meetings. In the early stages of a collaboration, education about each party's policies is critical and worth the effort. Stakeholders learn about additional resources, while their new partners help spread information about their own work.

The stakeholders believe that cross-agency partnerships provide major benefits to students and families as well. By working collaboratively,

homeless liaisons can better identify homeless families. For instance, in the District of Columbia, the central intake for families seeking emergency housing confirms that the families have their children enrolled in school and that the DCPS homeless liaison has them identified as homeless. In Prince George's County, the homeless liaison coordinates with the surrounding counties' homeless liaisons, including the District of Columbia, when they know a homeless family is moving out of the county or when another homeless liaison knows a homeless family is moving to Prince George's. In Manassas, the housing advocate refers homeless families to the school homeless liaison to make sure they have been identified in the school and can access the appropriate services.

Partnerships also expand the services available to homeless families without the family extending much extra effort. School homeless liaisons provide transportation, school uniforms, and other school supplies through the McKinney-Vento Act, but they do not have housing resources. By working with housing organizations, school homeless liaisons can connect their families to direct housing counseling. All three school homeless liaisons work with housing counseling groups and refer families and unaccompanied youth to them. Housing organizations also gain access to the resources the schools provide, and they become connected to advocates within the school system that can help families navigate school policies and mediate conflicts.

Finally, these partnerships provide more detailed information to service providers about their homeless population and resources to brainstorm solutions to challenges. In Prince George's County, the homeless liaison meets quarterly with case managers from the local shelters to learn what sort of services families need. In the District of Columbia, the number of families using emergency housing increases during the winter. Many of these families are housed in hotels and not in shelters where the shelter staff can more easily ensure that children go to school every day. This year the youth subcommittee of the District of Columbia Interagency Council on Homelessness worked together to plan for the additional students that would be identified and need McKinney-Vento services starting in the winter months. They were also able to mobilize to ensure that children staying in hotels attended school regularly.

These examples show that collaboration across sectors is possible through both individual initiative and formal bureaucratic structures and

can strengthen efforts to serve the most vulnerable children and families. The roundtables gave us a deeper level of understanding of the potential benefits of breaking down service silos, as well as the barriers staff face in doing so. Our new, relevant data and analysis about the impact of foreclosure on children brought disparate groups together and spurred a productive discussion that will continue beyond our limited study. We were encouraged by the appetite for learning among practitioners, even as they face persistent staffing and funding shortages in relation to growing need. National networks, such as the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth and the National Housing Counseling Action Network, could assist their members by documenting and promoting promising practices that demonstrate partnerships among housing and education agencies.

The roundtables also demonstrated the benefits of regional conversations. Families frequently move across political boundaries, and they would be better served by better communication—and, ideally, coordination—among the various city and county agencies. Finally, beyond day-to-day operations, we believe that local coalitions across sectors can be more powerful advocates for programs and laws that address family instability, particularly in this time of strained budgets. Given these payoffs, we hope this summary inspires other localities to organize roundtables and to build partnerships among the school, housing counseling, and homeless service sectors.

Organizations Participating in the Housing-Schools Roundtables

Washington, D.C.

Annie E. Casey Foundation

Arlington Public Schools

Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance—

Jacob France Institute, University of Baltimore

Calvert County Public Schools

City of Alexandria Office of Housing

City of Alexandria, Homeless Services

City of Manassas, Virginia

Community Foundation for the National Capital Region

Community Partnership for the Prevention of Homelessness

Community Preservation and Development Corporation

DC Alliance of Youth Advocates

D.C. Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education

D.C. Public Schools

Director of Family and Community Partnerships,
Montgomery County Schools
Fairfax County Public Schools
Hillside Work Scholarship Connection
Housing Counseling Services
Housing Initiative Partnership
Human Services Coalition of Prince George's
County
Jobs Have Priority, Inc.—Naylor Road Program
Maryland State Department of Education,
Homeless Education Coordinator
Metropolitan Washington Council of
Governments
Montgomery County Department of Health and
Human Services
Montgomery County Department of Housing
and Community Affairs
Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation
National Association for the Education of
Homeless Children and Youth
National Law Center on Homelessness and
Poverty
Prince George's County Public Schools
Urban Institute
United Way of the National Capital Area
Washington Area School Study Council
Wicomico County Board of Education

Baltimore

Abell Foundation
ACLU of Maryland
The Annie E. Casey Foundation
Associated Black Charities
Association of Baltimore Area Grantmakers
Baltimore City Public Schools
Baltimore Community Foundation
Baltimore County Department of Planning
Baltimore Neighborhood Collaborative/
Baltimore Homeownership Preservation
Coalition
Baltimore Safe and Sound Campaign
Belair-Edison Neighborhoods, Inc.
Baltimore Education Research Consortium
Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance—
Jacob France Institute, University of Baltimore
Center for Families, Children and the Courts,
University of Baltimore
Citizens Planning and Housing Association, Inc.
Diversified Housing Development, Inc.
Druid Heights Development Corporation
Eastside Community Development Corporation,
Inc.
Enterprise Community Partners
Goldseker Foundation
Habitat for Humanity of the Chesapeake
Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation

Johns Hopkins University
Maryland State Department of Education
Neighborhood Revitalization Project
Open Society Institute—Baltimore
Promise Heights, University of Maryland,
Baltimore
School of Social Work University of Maryland,
Baltimore
Southeast Community Development
Corporation
United Way of Central Maryland
Urban Institute

Notes

1. NNIP is a collaboration of the Urban Institute and local partners in 36 cities to further the development and use of neighborhood-level information systems for community building and local decision making. For more information, see <http://www.neighborhoodindicators.org>.
2. Data reported directly to the Urban Institute by the District of Columbia Public Schools.
3. Data reported directly to the Urban Institute by the Manassas City Public Schools.

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This brief is part of the Urban Institute's Low-Income Working Families project, a multiyear effort that focuses on the private- and public-sector contexts for families' success or failure. Both contexts offer opportunities for better helping families meet their needs.

The Low-Income Working Families project is currently supported by The Annie E. Casey Foundation.

The authors would like to thank Matthew Kachura, program manager at the Baltimore Neighborhood Indicators Alliance–Jacob France Institute, University of Baltimore, for cohosting the Baltimore regional roundtable session.

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