

## PURPOSE AND CONTEXT:

Our Capstone team partnered with Boulder County Housing Authority (BCHA) to identify, research and provide recommendations around multiple issues at their farmworker housing development Casa de la Esperanza (Casa) located in Longmont, Colorado. There were two major issues that we were asked to address: (1) facilitating resident input for an upcoming remodel and (2) high vacancy rates at the development. The development was built in 1993 and had not been remodeled since then, meaning that some of the structures were outdated, unsafe, and no longer serving the needs of the Casa community. Additionally, 40% of the units on the property were vacant.

These vacancies were a result of several problems, mainly stipulations in the USDA 514 loan and 516 grant that funded Casa's construction. Only low-income, qualified farmworkers can live at a development funded with these 514/516 loans and grants. Unfortunately, if the population of low-income farmworkers in close proximity to one of these developments decreases, vacancy rates go up and property managers need a way to house a broader demographic of people. The mechanism currently provided by the USDA is a waiver called a diminished needs waiver (DNW). The DNW temporarily waives the limitation that restricts residency to low-income farmworkers. In theory, the DNW is effective. Unfortunately, the process for applying for the waiver is costly, time consuming, and confusing due to a lack of resources and expertise at the USDA, leading to prolonged periods of high vacancy rates at some developments. In addition to the issues with the DNW, income calculations for potential tenants and the process for housing seasonal farmworkers here on visas resulted in higher vacancy rates.

Units sitting empty during a housing crisis results in families going unhoused, costs BCHA money, and is a waste of taxpayer dollars. To address these issues we provided three deliverables to BCHA: (1) a community engagement event to gather input on what the residents wanted to see in the upcoming remodel and a plain language summary of these recommendations, (2) a literature review of the issues surrounding farmworker housing, (3) a policy memo for the USDA detailing improvements that should be made to their off-farm housing program.



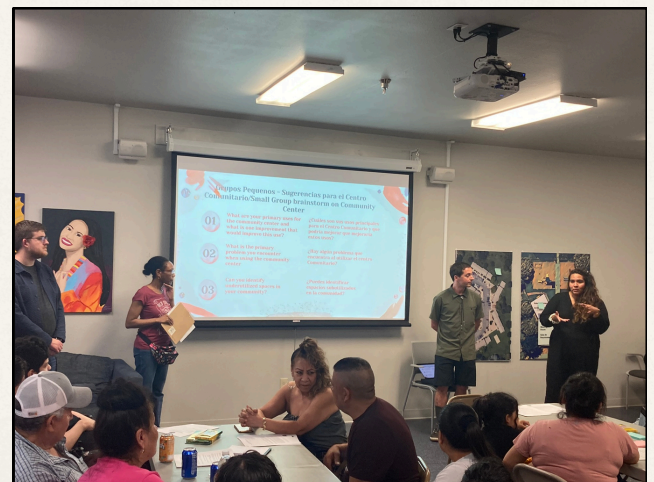
*Casa de la Esperanza (Casa)*

## METHODS:

**Deliverable 1:** We facilitated a community outreach event with Casa residents. We asked questions to garner their recommendations for the remodel and provided maps of the complex, sticky notes, and pens for them to write their suggestions and place them on the appropriate section of the map. We then translated, analyzed, and summarized these recommendations.

**Deliverable 2:** We began researching the issues we identified with Casa online and through the University of Colorado's Law Library. We then categorized and summarized the information related to farmworker housing and provided an annotated bibliography to BCHA as one of our deliverables.

**Deliverable 3:** We conducted interviews with 16 other 514/516 developments with the same vacancy issues to determine the causes of their vacancies. With the information from these interviews, further online research, and discussions with our partner, we wrote a policy memo with six recommendations to the USDA.



*Casa de la Esperanza Community Outreach Meeting - June 7, 2024*



## OUTCOMES:

During our Capstone project, we learned how prevalent the housing crisis is within the U.S., especially for farmworkers, and how the income and citizenship restrictions in the rural housing programs decrease accessibility to agricultural workers. Our outcomes hope to address this crisis and the importance of gathering input from the residents while mending the communication gap between them and the local housing authority. Also, learning from housing organizations how they are affected by the federal housing restrictions helps to bring the inequities in the rural housing programs to the forefront, thus initiating policy reform.

After gathering and analyzing resident and staff input from the outreach meeting, community center recommendations include: (1) install privacy film on the windows, (2) increase the door width to allow for food bank deliveries, and (3) remove the kitchen sink to maximize counter space. In the units and around the complex, the residents want (1) air conditioning and washers and dryers in their units, (2) a new playground relocated to the center of the property, and (3) privacy partitions between units or fencing around the property.

With our policy memo, the key data and findings of our research on the loan were that many organizations could not fill vacancies due to income and citizenship restrictions. The National Agricultural Statistics Service's (NASS) Farm Labor Survey (FLS) data from April 7-13, 2024, illustrates that farmworkers worked 40.6 hours per week, and 87% of hired workers worked 150 or more days (Combs et al., 2024), causing them to be ineligible for housing. As for citizenship, five of the 17 (29.4%) developments we interviewed have had vacancy increases due to the inability to house undocumented and/or non-farmworkers, which creates another barrier when attempting to access housing.

We developed six recommendations based on our research: (1) create a new priority system that allows over-income farmworkers and non-farmworkers to live in agricultural developments if there are no eligible farmworkers on a development's waitlist, (2) establish an online portal to expedite the DNW approval process and increase training of USDA in reviewing DNW applications, (3) allow property managers to calculate H-2A visa workers' incomes based on the actual period they worked, (4) create a farmworker-specific wage index to calculate workers' wages, (5) allow housing developments to pre-lease units to farmworkers, and (6) property managers must provide ineligible tenants with a relocation package when asked to leave a 514/516 property.

Our deliverables provide BCHA with additional information regarding the 514/516 rural housing programs, redesign recommendations from Casa residents and staff that will potentially be implemented during the renovation process, and a policy memo that can help remove the income and citizenship barriers within the programs, thus reducing vacancies for BCHA and other agricultural housing developments in the United States.

### Reference

Combs, B., Boess, B., Brennan, S., Farmer, D., Johnson, Z., Mathison, M., Mondesir, R., Peterson, S., Reason, M., & Varner, T. (2024). *April hired workers down 5 percent; wage rate increased 5 percent from previous year* [Agricultural Wage Data]. United States Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Statistics Service.

## IMPACT:

We hope that our project creates an impact at the local and federal levels. For BCHA, our goal was to strengthen the relationship between them and Casa residents and staff by informing the organization of the Casa community's redesign recommendations. Additionally, for the Casa community, our goal was to affirm that their opinions are valued. As for the policy memo, we intend to make policy changes at the federal level that will increase the accessibility of quality, low-income housing to agricultural workers while removing the income and citizenship barriers that prevent housing organizations from providing that accessibility to workers.

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