



Tenant Advisory Council (TAC)

Meeting Minutes Report

Date: June 30, 2026

Location: Online

Facilitator: Meg Kausch, Community Engagement Policy Coordinator

Guest Speakers:

- Becky Smith – Project Coordinator, Rent Assistance, Home Forward
- Michael Buonocore – Interim Executive Director, Home Forward

Meeting Duration: 2 Hours

Recorder: Frank Culbertson

TAC Members Present: Frank Culbertson, Traci Van Zandt, Raven Smith, Tammi Bell, Sarah Lawrence, Margaret Rodgers, Seclenda Hadley, Melissa McClellan, Debbie Blackmon, Ruthie Rhone, Megan Sahim, Shawntae Barber, Corpus Pacem, Carla Williams Frison

Home Forward Staff: Meg Kausch, Nicole Patty, Christina Dirks

1. Welcome, Announcements, and Opening Business

Meg Kausch opened the meeting with announcements and administrative items.

Meeting Notes Approval:

- April and May TAC meeting notes were presented for approval. Motion made by Melissa; seconded by Traci Van Zandt. Notes approved. All meeting notes are posted on the TAC page of the Home Forward website.

TAC Annual Report and Senior Leadership Presentation Update:

- Meg Kausch reported that the TAC member introduction video is nearly complete. TAC members Frank Culbertson, Raven Smith, Corpus Pacem, and Traci Van Zandt will attend the Senior Leadership Team meeting in person on July 16 to present the annual report.
- Additional members (including Ruthie) are contributing short video clips to be incorporated into the group video introduction.
- Members were invited to share any remaining feedback on the annual report. The only update since the May meeting was minor wording adjustments reflecting the near-completion of the Emergency Readiness Sheets and other safety projects.

Upcoming In-Person Meeting:

- One additional required in-person meeting will be held in the summer – either July or in August. A member vote will be taken to determine the preferred month.
- The meeting will be held at a location in East County (Eastwood Court area) to better serve members who have been traveling long distances.
- Members were reminded that transportation assistance is available and that a hybrid option (in-person plus Zoom) may be accommodated on request.

Section 3 Community Event – Rescheduled:

- The Section 3 workforce event, originally planned for May, has been rescheduled to the evening of July 16 at New Columbia in North Portland (5:30–7:30 PM). The event will feature Home Forward workforce programs including the Goals program, along with partner organizations and resident feedback opportunities.

Building Walkthroughs:

- Meg Kausch announced that site walkthroughs with staff are being organized. TAC members are invited to participate in walkthroughs at buildings where they live or nearby, with the goal of building direct relationships between residents and building-level or leadership staff.

Staff Engagement Planning:

- Members were asked to consider which Home Forward departments or staff they would like to hear from in future meetings. Meg indicated she can help identify the right contacts for any department.

2. Presentation: Rent Assistance – Becky Smith, Project Coordinator

Becky Smith, Project Coordinator with the Home Forward Section 8 (Housing Choice Voucher) program, presented on rent assistance processes, communications, and inspection practices. Michael Buonocore and Nicole Patty were also present in a listening and support capacity.

Rent Assistance Services Coordinators (RASCs):

- Clarified that the staff member assigned to each household is a Rent Assistance Services Coordinator (RASC), not a caseworker or advocate. Their role is eligibility determination, number-crunching, and problem-solving.
- Policy requires RASCs to respond within three business days. If unresponsive, tenants may escalate to a supervisor, then manager, then director.
- Email is the recommended contact method – it creates a timestamped record and is more reliable than voicemail. Tenants may CC a supervisor on follow-up emails if they have not received a timely response.

- If a RASC has left Home Forward, tenants may be routed to a dead mailbox. The front desk should be contacted in those cases, as all calls are logged.

Transfer Process and Maximum Rent Information:

- Becky Smith presented an updated Maximum Rent chart now being sent to tenants when they are scheduled for a transfer briefing. The chart details how the maximum approvable rent varies by voucher size, utilities included, year of construction, and unit type (apartment vs. house/duplex).
- RASCs are trained not to give yes/no approval on a potential unit until landlord information is received, due to the many variables involved. Becky Smith noted that tenants may contact her directly for a non-binding preliminary estimate to avoid paying application fees on units that would not be approved.

Inspections:

- Initial move-in inspections cover basic health and safety standards only – they are not comprehensive quality or maintenance evaluations.
- Ongoing re-inspections occur every 24 months and must be completed to maintain rent assistance. Tenants may reschedule if needed; failure to complete inspections by deadline can result in proposed termination of assistance.
- If a landlord does not respond to at least two documented repair requests, tenants may request a complaint inspection. If violations remain unresolved, Home Forward may place its portion of rent in abatement (withheld) for up to approximately 60 days, after which tenants may request a transfer.
- Tenants are responsible for submitting and documenting maintenance requests in writing; photos or screenshots are acceptable as documentation.

TAC Member Feedback and Discussion:

- **Accountability gaps:** Multiple members shared direct experiences of RASCs being unresponsive for extended periods, leading to financial losses (e.g., forfeited application fees) and housing instability. Members made clear that the escalation paths described by Becky Smith frequently do not work in practice – supervisors and directors also fail to respond.
- **Systemic culture concerns:** Members expressed that the problems described are not isolated incidents but reflect a broader cultural issue within the rent assistance department. Becky Smith acknowledged this directly, stating she disagrees with the current departmental culture and has been working to change it from within.
- **Inspection process clarity:** Members questioned whether tenants sufficiently understand the limited scope of move-in inspections, noting that passing a basic inspection can create a false sense of security about a unit's condition. Becky Smith acknowledged this and indicated she is developing a tenant handbook that would clearly explain inspection scope, rent calculations, transfer steps, hardship criteria, and reasonable accommodation requests.

- **Staff wellness:** Members acknowledged the visible stress experienced by Becky Smith during the meeting and encouraged Home Forward leadership to address the working conditions contributing to staff burnout, noting the connection between staff wellbeing and quality of tenant service.

Response from Interim Executive Director Buonocore:

- Acknowledged the seriousness of what was shared and committed to following up with rent assistance leadership.
- Confirmed that accountability processes exist at Home Forward, though acknowledged more work is needed.
- Noted he will follow up specifically on the individual case of a member who lost housing opportunity due to RASC non-response.

Proposed Improvements Identified During Discussion:

- A centralized tracking system for tenant contacts and complaints to Home Forward, so data can demonstrate the scope of responsiveness issues.
- A confidential or external reporting channel for tenants to share grievances without fear of retaliation or retribution against their housing.
- A tenant handbook covering all key voucher processes in plain language (in development by Becky Smith).
- A ticket-based system for phone contacts to the front desk, so calls don't fall through when tenants are unable to use email.

Becky Smith invited members to contact her directly at **becky.smith@homeforward.org** and expressed a desire to return to future TAC meetings on a regular basis.

3. Policy Review – Community Engagement Spectrum

The TAC continued its review of the draft **Community Engagement Spectrum** policy, which was first distributed at the May meeting. This remains the TAC's first formal policy review assignment.

Policy Overview (presented by Meg Kausch and Christina Dirks):

- **Problem statement:** Home Forward makes decisions affecting tenants' housing and communities without consistently or meaningfully involving those tenants in the process.
- **Solution:** A formal policy requiring staff to apply one of three levels of engagement – Listen, Inform, or Consult – for any major decision impacting tenants. The policy includes centralized tracking within the policy department to advance accountability.
- **Listen:** Home Forward takes in information, knowledge, and lived experience from tenants and uses it to improve operations.

- **Inform:** Home Forward proactively shares information tenants need to make informed decisions about housing, services, and resources.
- **Consult:** Home Forward seeks feedback from tenants when making changes to programs, policies, or operations – and reports back on how that feedback was used.

Member Feedback:

- Members responded positively to the overall framework, particularly the "listen" component and the appendices that outline what was heard from tenants and how it was acted upon (or not).
- Members raised the need for a defined policy review timeline and enforcement consequences – not just documentation of the intention to engage.
- Members asked whether tenants could have review or sign-off authority on engagement plans before they are finalized, rather than only providing input after the fact.
- Members noted that a fourth category beyond “consult” may be needed to more meaningfully empower tenants – closer to a collaborative or co-decision-making role.
- Frank Culbertson raised a practical concern about the tracking infrastructure required: standardized templates and databases across departments represent a significant undertaking and must be resourced and assigned to specific staff to be meaningful.
- Members flagged that the policy does not yet explicitly address tenant compensation for participation; Christina Dirks confirmed this will be added.
- Members suggested that TAC members could be matched to specific Home Forward departments to serve as liaison contacts, helping departments connect with tenants before finalizing engagement plans.

Staff Response (Christina Dirks):

- Acknowledged that the policy is intended as a starting point and that incremental implementation is realistic given current staff capacity (policy team is currently two people).
- Confirmed that an explicit review timeline and compensation language will be incorporated into the next draft.
- Indicated openness to involving the TAC more formally in reviewing and approving engagement documentation.

Members were encouraged to contact Meg Kausch or Christina Dirks directly with additional policy feedback. A revised draft will be circulated before the next meeting.

4. Subcommittee Updates

- Meg Kausch provided brief updates through the shared tracking document. Members were directed to their subcommittee email threads for more detailed updates.
- The Emergency Readiness Sheets (Safety Subcommittee) are near finalization; a distribution plan for building-level posting is in development.
- Subcommittee-level communication improvements are being explored, including a group text thread or messaging app to reduce reliance on email.
- Members expressed interest in having dedicated Home Forward staff contacts assigned to each subcommittee to facilitate faster progress and clearer communication channels.

5. Next Steps

- Members to review the revised Community Engagement Spectrum draft (to be circulated by staff) and prepare feedback for the July meeting.
- Members to submit preference (July or August) for the summer in-person meeting via chat or email.
- Meg Kausch to confirm logistics for the July 16 Senior Leadership Annual Report presentation and coordinate with attending members.
- Meg Kausch to work on assigning Home Forward staff contacts to each subcommittee.
- Becky Smith to continue development of the tenant handbook covering voucher processes, inspection scope, and hardship criteria.
- Michael Buonocore to follow up with rent assistance leadership based on concerns raised in the meeting; to address the individual RASC non-response case raised by a member.
- Meg Kausch to follow up with interested members about building walkthrough scheduling.

Meg Kausch adjourned the meeting.