

Dane County Farmworker Housing Planning Project

Engagement Snapshot & Preliminary Findings (Phase 2)



Why this engagement

Purpose & context

- Understand current housing conditions, unmet needs, challenges, opportunities, and desired housing attributes.
- Use findings as the foundation for grounded, actionable housing plan recommendations.
- Housing challenges sit within a broader rural affordable housing shortage; both on-farm and off-farm solutions face regulatory, political, and market barriers.
- Heightened fear related to ICE has made recruitment and participation harder.

Key tension

Translating needs into parcel-specific recommendations while safety risks are high.

Engagement was designed to prioritize privacy and reduce risk.

Who we heard from

Engagement snapshot

Farmworker interviews & focus groups (nINA Collective)

21
total voices

3
focus groups

13
1:1 interviews (30 min)

13/16
Farmworker sessions conducted in Spanish

2/16
Farmworker sessions conducted in Hmong

1/16
Farmworker session conducted in English

Additional stakeholder interviews (Sift Consulting)

5
Farm owners interviewed

7
ag support orgs interviewed

5
land-use decision makers interviewed

21
farm owner survey responses

Theme 1

Why workers come to Dane County

Drawn by social networks and the promise of stability.

- Family and friends help connect workers to jobs and housing.
- Year-round dairy work offers more stability than seasonal work elsewhere.
- Costs once felt manageable; rising costs are eroding that advantage.
- Workers described both pride in the work and practical financial goals (supporting family, building homes back home).

“I liked the job so I stayed, I think it’s very nice, very friendly and it’s good pay with good hours.”

Farmworker

2 primary drivers

- Social networks
- Stability

Theme 2

Housing is tied to employment

Most housing is employer-provided, and losing a job can mean losing housing.

Typical arrangements

- On/near-farm housing: single-family homes, trailers, shared houses.
- Independent rentals in towns/cities are the exception.
- Overcrowding is common; privacy is limited—especially for families and shift workers.

\$400–\$600/mo

typical partial rent when workers pay rent (often subsidized)

Vulnerability

Housing dependence shapes what workers feel safe saying—and what they feel free to do.

Theme 3

Conditions are often substandard

Aging housing stock + delayed repairs create daily strain.

Inadequate heat

Broken windows / drafts

Leaking roofs / trailers

Malfunctioning appliances

Delayed or refused repairs

Internet access barriers

“My room is very cold, the windows are old and do not keep the air out. There is no heat, I use a space heater.”

Farmworker

Also noted

Workers sometimes pay out-of-pocket for repairs, and internet access can be hard to secure in rural areas.

What gets in the way

System barriers

Zoning & land-use

- Restrictions and inconsistent code interpretation block new builds and rehab.
- Preferred models (small units, modular/prefab, clustered housing) often conflict with ordinances.

“Need zoning changes for this to become a reality.”

Cost + capacity

- Construction, repair, and maintenance costs deter investment.
- Owners can feel overwhelmed by legal/HR implications of providing housing.

“I am an expert in dairy farming. I am not a housing expert.”

Data + visibility

- Need is real and growing—but not uniformly known or easily quantified.
- Informal and overcrowded arrangements are often invisible to traditional data sources.

Hard to plan without shared, trusted, and geographically specific data.

Stakeholder lens

What farm owners are saying

Housing is widely viewed as a workforce strategy, yet responsibility is debated.

“If we don’t have farmworkers, we don’t have farms. If we don’t have farms, we don’t have food.”

Farm owner

Many owners are willing to provide housing, but need:

- Financial support
- Regulatory clarity
- Shared tools and guidance

Others strongly prefer off-farm, community-based housing:

“I don’t want to take on the responsibility of housing workers... I just want affordable housing options available to my workers that are less than 30 minutes from the farm.”

Looking forward

What workers want (5-year horizon)

Independent, family-appropriate housing - separated from employment.

Privacy & independence

Own home or apartment. No roommates.

Family-appropriate units

Multi-bedroom, clean air, reliable utilities.

Flexibility & stability

Housing not tied to one employer.

“I would like to be able to have my own home. No roommates. I would feel like it would help me find my goals and invest in my own land.”

Farmworker

So what?

Cross-cutting insights & next steps

Housing is connected to...

- Transportation & commute times
- Farm viability and labor stability
- Community acceptance and infrastructure
- Wages and cost of living

Persistent challenges

- Overcrowding and lack of privacy
- Fear of retaliation and immigration enforcement
- Rising rent, food, and utility costs
- Long commutes when rural housing is unavailable

Next steps

- Complete remaining interviews and focus groups.
- Translate findings into grounded housing plan recommendations that are realistic, flexible, and safety-conscious.
- Center privacy, dignity, and family needs while addressing zoning, cost, and implementation supports.

Farmworker Housing Opportunity Lab #1

Objectives

- Share an overview of the current state of farmworker housing in Dane County, learned through community engagement with farmworkers, farm owners, and agricultural/housing support organizations
- Stress-test realistic farmworker housing models and build shared clarity on what it would actually take (politically, procedurally, and culturally) to make them real in Dane County.
- Begin to move from conceptual to more specific housing models that begin to include recommended housing attributes, possible locations, etc.

Participants included representatives from:

- Dane County Planning and Development
- Capitol Area Regional Planning Commission
- Dane County Towns Association
- Dane County Cities and Villages Association
- General Engineering Company
- Village of Windsor
- Town of Perry
- Town of Black Earth
- Town of Springfield

Next Step:

Housing Opportunities Lab #2
Wednesday, March 18 from 4 - 6 pm
UW West Madison Ag Research Station