

Dane County Farmworker Housing Planning Project

Housing Opportunities Labs' Summary for the Phase 3 Interim Report

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

In Phase 3 of Dane County's Farmworker Housing Planning Project, Sift Consulting LLC, in partnership with the Capital Area Regional Planning Commission, convened two Housing Opportunities Labs to leverage the experience and expertise of planning professionals and local land-use decision-makers. Designed to translate community engagement findings into actionable housing strategies, these Labs represent a key shift in the planning process, as the project moves from **community engagement to housing recommendations and implementation design**. Throughout the project, there continues to be an emphasis on identifying key gaps and constraints.

- **Housing Opportunities Lab #1 (February 11, 2026)** focused on surfacing barriers, testing early housing concepts, and identifying what would need to change to make preliminary housing models feasible.
- **Housing Opportunities Lab #2 (March 18, 2026)** built on the foundation established during the first Lab by introducing more defined program concepts and inviting participants to refine, react to, and pressure-test draft housing prototypes.

Both Labs kicked off with a brief presentation to ground the participants in the engagement findings to date. Lab #1 participants were provided a brief summary report of Phase 2 engagement findings as pre-reading. Lab #2 participants were provided a brief FAQ as pre-reading.

Both Labs were designed as interactive working sessions that included full group conversation, small group work, and individual reflection. **These findings from the Labs are not final recommendations.** Rather, they represent early-stage findings, grounded in stakeholder expertise, that will be further refined through subsequent engagement and analysis.

Lab #1: Framing the Challenge and Stress-Testing Possibilities

Participants included representatives from Dane County Human Services Division of Housing Access and Affordability, Dane County Planning and Development, Dane County Zoning, Dane County Towns Association, Village of Windsor, Town of Perry, Town of Black Earth, General Engineering Company, and the nINA Collective.

Participants engaged in the following activities. This structure emphasized surfacing real-world constraints early, particularly related to zoning, political feasibility, and program design.

- A **pre-mortem exercise** to surface risks and possible failure points

- **Small-group stress testing** of housing prototypes across rural, on-farm, and village-based contexts. Preliminary prototypes included:
 - Rehab of existing farmworker housing on-farm or nearby in rural township
 - Outbuilding conversion, pre-fab, or new site construction on-farm or nearby in rural township
 - New construction of 3-5 unit clustered or multi-unit on-farm or nearby in rural township
 - New construction of clustered or multi-unit housing of 6-20 units off-farm in village
 - Adaptive reuse of second floor main street, motel, school, big box store in village
 - New construction of 4-7 unit multi-unit housing off-farm in village
 - New construction of 8-20 unit multi-unit off-farm in village
 - Adaptive reuse of hotel/motel or new construction in a hamlet
- **Full-group reflection** to identify patterns, opportunities, and unresolved questions

Lab #2: Refining Program Concepts and Implementation Pathways

Participants included representatives from Dane County Human Services Division of Housing Access and Affordability, Dane County Planning and Development, Town of Perry, Town of Black Earth, Town of Vienna, Village of Windsor, General Engineering Company, University of Wisconsin-Division of Extension, UW-Madison School for Workers, Legal Action of Wisconsin, the nINA Collective, H&M Custom Services, Pond Hill Dairy, Yahara Pride Farms, and Maierfarms.

Lab #2 shifted toward more **concrete program design**, using rotating stations focused on four draft housing prototypes and two cross-cutting themes:

- Housing prototype: farm owner forgivable loan program
- Housing prototype: centralized apartment development
- Housing prototype: adaptive reuse
- Housing prototype: dispersed small multi-family housing
- Cross-cutting theme: housing attributes and tenant experience
- Cross-cutting theme: tenant eligibility and protections

Participants were asked to react to draft program elements, identify dealbreakers, and provide guidance on what would deter participation by directly marking up and adding feedback via sticky notes at each station. Draft program elements included estimated costs, draft Request for Proposals (RFP) or Request for Applications (RFA) elements, eligibility criteria, zoning/development considerations, administration and enforcement processes, and prototype pros and cons. Each station also add specific prompts that related to core tensions/tradeoffs or gaps in knowledge.

A key framing for Lab #2 was that all materials were in **draft form**, providing specific details for participants to **react to** based on their practical experience.

KEY FINDINGS AND EVOLUTION ACROSS LABS

1 Zoning and regulatory barriers are foundational constraints.

This theme emerged during Lab #1 and was further sharpened and confirmed during Lab #2. Key issues include:

- Development rights required for additional units
- Conditional Use Permit (CUP) processes and associated public hearings
- Restrictions on accessory dwelling units and outbuilding conversions
- Limitations related to septic system and infrastructure capacity
- Parcel configuration and acreage requirements
- Constraints affecting density and dwelling types connected to comprehensive planning

Taken together, these constraints create a system in which even relatively modest housing solutions will be difficult to implement, particularly in more rural areas of the County, proximal to farms. Lab #2 introduced a critical nuance from participating farm owners: **if zoning allowed it, many farm owners indicated they would build farmworker housing independently, without public funding.** This suggests that zoning reform may be as important, or even more important, as financial incentives in unlocking appropriate housing development for farmworkers in Dane County.

2 Programs that are too restrictive or complex risk low participation.

The pre-mortem exercise from Lab #1 raised concerns about program complexity; Lab #2 made this even more explicit as participants reacted to realistic RFP and RFA eligibility criteria, application requirements, and ongoing administration. **Trust and participation barriers** were raised repeatedly. Both farm owners and farmworkers may be hesitant to engage due to mistrust of government, language barriers, and concerns related to documentation status and data privacy. Participants emphasized that:

- County involvement can be perceived as a **disincentive**, particularly if the program:
 - Includes extensive application or reporting requirements
 - Introduces worker oversight (*aka the County is seen as becoming an intermediary between farm owners and farm workers*)
- Farm owners strongly value:
 - Independence and flexibility
 - Predictability in accessing housing for workers
 - The ability to ensure housing is reactive to their needs (including the ability to scale or reduce housing commitments)
- There can be 'blind spots' within program eligibility criteria or tenant application processes that inadvertently prevent farm workers from accessing the housing due to informality of employment arrangements, language barriers, and documentation status

At the same time, participants acknowledged that **public funding requires accountability**, creating an inherent tension between simplicity and accessibility and oversight and compliance.

This tension will need to be carefully navigated in final program design.

3 A portfolio of more than one housing approach is advisable.

Instead of investing the entire \$8 million into one singular project, a portfolio of different housing approaches can be responsive to different geographies, farm types, and worker preferences. Additionally, an array of housing types could be more resilient to farm closures or consolidations and changes in employment. Participants emphasized that housing can be responsive to farm workers at different stages of their lives and career journeys and that a mixed approach would allow for single individuals, couples, and families to find the housing that best suits their needs.

At both Labs, participants responded to an array of housing options – from locations in townships and hamlets to villages; single family through multi-family housing options; rehabilitation and adaptive reuse to new construction; and centralized to dispersed models. Across both Labs, there was consistent validation that:

- **Rehabilitation of existing housing** is the most immediately feasible strategy – whether adaptive reuse of underutilized to vacant buildings off-farm to current farmworker housing on-farm that is aging and in need of repair.
 - This approach leverages existing structures, avoids some zoning hurdles, and focuses on improving current conditions rather than building entirely new units.
 - Participants emphasized that there can be less community resistance and more local ‘champions’ for housing development when repurposing buildings. Local governments may be more likely to amend zoning codes and future land use maps if rehabing old or unused structures.
- **Small-scale, low-density housing developments** (e.g., 1–2 units, duplexes, modest expansions) are more compatible with zoning, more aligned with the rural character of Dane County, and more likely to be accepted by town/hamlet/village communities.
 - Lab #2 showed growing alignment around dispersed, small-scale multifamily housing (2–4 units). Participants noted that this model is more compatible with existing zoning frameworks, may face less community resistance, allows for geographic distribution closer to farms, provides flexibility in unit types (families and individuals), and allows farmworkers to simply be “people in a neighborhood.”
 - While several participants expressed that this was a very realistic possibility, it also introduces greater coordination complexity (multiple sites, municipalities), higher administrative burden for development and management, and risks of ongoing poor housing conditions if oversight is insufficient.
- **Larger-scale model implementation (e.g. centralized apartment complexes and larger scale adaptive reuse) remains complex.** Participants acknowledged potential benefits to larger scale models, including: serving workers from multiple farms, providing housing options independent from employer oversight, and possible easier long-term management and regulation.
 - However, significant challenges remain, such as high land acquisition costs, need for zoning alignment and local support, transportation considerations, and questions about ownership and long-term management.
 - Developing a larger-scale housing model using adaptive reuse continued to be viewed as promising, particularly for revitalizing underutilized or blighted properties, leveraging existing infrastructure, and potentially reducing per-unit costs.

- However, during Lab #2 participants added nuance to this, including that suitable buildings may be limited and difficult to identify, renovation costs and building constraints can be unpredictable and sometimes exceed the cost of new construction; and community understanding and support will be critical.
- There was continued concern about whether larger developments would inadvertently increase attention or scrutiny from immigration officials.

4 There continues to be tension around farm owner control of housing.

Both Labs highlighted a persistent and unresolved tension:

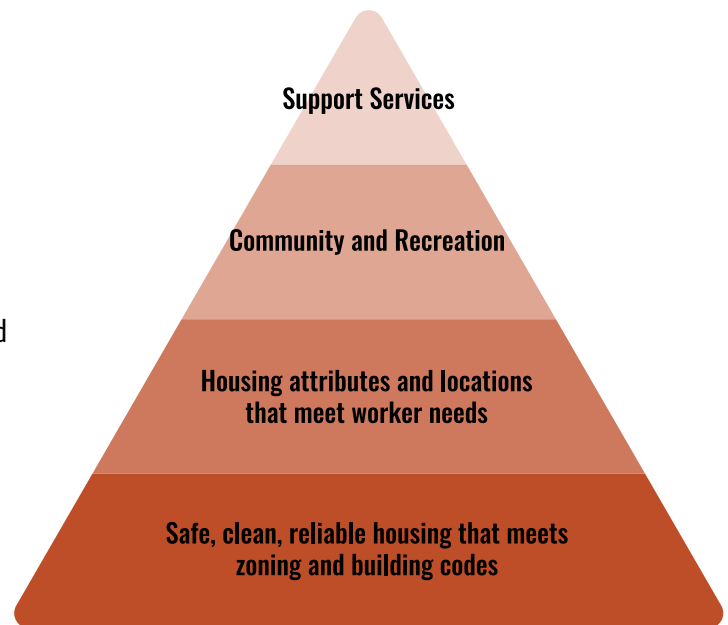
- Farm owners prioritize proximity and control over workers' housing
- Farmworkers often express interest in independent, off-farm housing, specifically as means to reduce employer control

Lab #2 deepened this understanding, as farm owners emphasized the importance of housing being close enough to monitor informally housing they own and the necessity that housing is available when they need to hire workers.

5 Housing design and placement should prioritize privacy, flexibility, and the practical needs of farmworkers.

At a foundational level, all farmworker housing that is constructed or rehabilitated with County funding should meet the following baseline conditions:

- Provide safe, clean, and reliable housing located within a reasonable distance of their workplace;
- Provide privacy, stability, and dignity, with enough space for rest, cooking, and daily life after long workdays;
- Provide well-maintained units with modern amenities (heat, cooling, laundry access, internet, etc.), without overcrowding or unsafe conditions;
- Provide a sense of normalcy and community;
- Provide housing that is stable and respectful of farmworker needs, not temporary or precarious; and
- Meet all applicable building and zoning codes.



During Lab #2, participants were prompted to share additional insights into housing attributes and tenant experience which, along with input gathered through the community engagement process, will ultimately help inform housing design recommendations.

Transportation was cited as a critical consideration for farmworker housing¹ (*which aligns with findings from Phase 2 interviews and focus groups*). Participants emphasized that it shouldn't be a false choice between being close to work or *close to amenities*, rather the plan should purposefully work to reduce transportation challenges and increase access to services and amenities. In particular, the housing plan should consider and leverage existing transportation and shuttle options, in particular those available for H2A workers.

Additional key themes include:

- Preference for privacy, particularly for families
- Acceptance of shared spaces in certain contexts (e.g., newer or single workers), but generally as a necessity rather than preference
- Need for:
 - Adequate laundry capacity
 - Cooking facilities (with safety considerations)
 - Outdoor and community space

Increased laundry needs should be considered with workers needing to clean regularly due to pesticides/dirt/etc. from farm labor. Also, workers with similar shifts can create peak demand for shared cooking or laundry facilities so those amenities should be scaled appropriately.

Participants emphasized that housing should reflect different “stages” of worker needs, from dormitory-style housing for single workers who are new to the country, to family-oriented units. This reinforces the importance of **mixed unit types within and across developments**.

6 Tenant eligibility and protections remain a point of tension between farm owners and housing advocates.

Because many programs thrive or fail on the details, Lab #2 introduced and refined a draft framework for tenant eligibility and protections, examining specifics such as employment verification options, lease agreements, income eligibility, and more. Discussions revealed a more complex and, at times, competing set of priorities related to the relationship between housing and employment.

Farm Owner Perspective: Many farm owners emphasized that housing is fundamentally a workforce tool, not a standalone housing intervention. From this perspective:

- Housing is intended to support **active employees**
- Maintaining some level of alignment between **employment and tenancy** is seen as necessary to:
 - Ensure housing availability for incoming workers
 - Support farm operations and labor continuity
- There is concern that allowing tenants to remain in housing after leaving agricultural employment could:
 - Reduce available housing supply for current workers

1 Wisconsin is one of more than 30 states where immigrants living in the U.S. without proof of citizenship or legal residency can't get driver's licenses. ([Source](#))

- Create administrative and operational challenges

This perspective reflects both practical constraints (limited housing supply) and a desire to maintain **predictability and control** in workforce management.

Tenant Stability Perspective: At the same time, participants, including service providers and housing practitioners, emphasized that:

- Housing stability is critical to **worker safety, dignity, and long-term wellbeing**
- Tying housing too closely to employment can create:
 - Vulnerability during job transitions
 - Barriers to worker mobility and choice
- Short-term protections (e.g., lease completion or transition periods) can help balance stability with system capacity

From this perspective, **some degree of separation between housing and employment is necessary to avoid unintended harm.**

These discussions highlight that **tenant eligibility and protections are integral parts of program design** and must be carefully integrated into final recommendations. Striking the right balance will be critical to ensure that a housing program is accessible and supportive to farmworkers and conducive to farm owner participation.

CONCLUSION

Together, Housing Opportunities Labs #1 and #2 demonstrate both the complexity of the challenge and the emerging clarity around viable paths forward.

Key takeaways include:

- Zoning and regulatory barriers are a primary constraint and a key opportunity for larger-scale impact and improvement to farmworker housing
- Small-scale, distributed housing models appear most feasible in the near term, including both on-farm and off-farm models
- Larger-scale off-farm models remain important but require additional support and face greater barriers to implementation
- There is a fundamental tension around farm owner control of housing and this bleeds into tenant eligibility and protections
- Program success will depend on simplicity, trust, and alignment with real-world incentives
- A single solution will not meet the diversity of needs across Dane County

Most importantly, the Labs reinforce that effective implementation will require balancing competing priorities, including zoning and development feasibility, worker autonomy and choice, longevity and resilience of housing design and locations, and meeting the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalized of farm workers.

These findings will continue to be refined in subsequent phases, as the project moves toward final recommendations for County investment.