

COMMUNITIES / SOCIAL ISSUES

Chester County Commissioner Josh Maxwell Hosts Community Groups and Legislators to Discuss Affordable Housing

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Left to Right: Representative Dan Williams (74th Legislative District), Senator Katie Muth (44th Senatorial District), Chester County Commissioner Josh Maxwell, Mayor Peter Urscheler of Phoenixville, Mayor Lillian DeBaptiste of West Chester. Not pictured: US Representative Chrissy Houlahan (Pennsylvania 6th Congressional District), Representative Josh Lawrence (13th Legislative District) - Submitted Images

WEST CHESTER, PA — Chester County Commissioner Josh Maxwell, in partnership with several nonprofit community organizations, hosted a legislative gathering this week at the [West Chester University Graduate Center](#). The goal of the gathering was to share voices heard during recently held housing focus groups, and to explore ways legislators and community groups can work together to ensure affordable and accessible housing is available to all residents of Chester County.

The legislative gathering followed a series of six focus group sessions hosted by local nonprofits including Home of the Sparrow, Orion Communities, Act in Faith of Greater West Chester, Kennett Area Community Service, Community Youth and Women's

Alliance, Oxford Area Neighborhood Services, Habitat for Humanity of Chester County, Oxford Silo, Black Women of Chester County in Action, and the Chester County Partnership to End Homelessness in partnership with The Housing Alliance of PA. The goal of the focus groups was listening to and lifting the voices of people with lived experience and expertise to make substantial positive changes in the rust belt, rural, and inner ring suburb communities. A total of 61 individuals shared their testimonies and experiences regarding housing in Chester County.

The event hosted by Commissioner Maxwell featured presentations from Cheryl Miles, Chairwoman of Black Women of Chester County in Action, Wendy Gaynor from Orion Communities, and a video compilation of residents' housing stories.



Left to Right: Cheryl Miles, Chairwoman for Black Women of Chester County in Action, Representative Dan Williams (74th Legislative District), Senator Katie Muth (44th Senatorial District), Chester County Commissioner Josh Maxwell, Mayor Peter Urscheler of [Phoenixville](#), Mayor Lillian DeBaptiste of West Chester, Rob Henry (Administrator, Chester County Partnership to End Homelessness), Hallie Romanowski (Executive Director, ACT in Faith of Greater West Chester), Leandria Hall (Program Director – Special Programs, Oxford Area Neighborhood Services), Amy Scheuren (Program Director, Kennett Area Community Service), Matrie Johnson (Director of Programs, Home of the Sparrow). Not pictured: Kris Keller (Executive Director, Orion Communities)

Following the presentation, a “Call to Action” was presented jointly by Kris Keller, Executive Director of Orion Communities, Dale Gravett, Executive Director for the Housing Authority of Chester County, Matrie Johnson, Director of Programs at Home of the Sparrow, Leandria Hall, Program Director for Special Programs at Oxford Area Neighborhood Services, Amy Scheuren, Program Director at Kennett Area Community Service, and Rob Henry, Administrator for the Chester County Partnership to End Homelessness.

Said Cheryl Miles, in her opening remarks, “We have to ensure that low-income individuals have access to safe, decent, affordable, housing. We chose to amplify residents’ voices so as we are making important decisions about housing in Chester County, we are taking into consideration this particular population and working for low-income residents.”

Kris Keller spoke to the residents most at need.

“When we talk about low and extremely low-income families, it’s helpful to remember who this includes – child & elder care workers, bank tellers, grocery store staff, lawn care providers, support staff – people who help keep everyone’s lives running smoothly,” Keller said. “But it also includes elders and neighbors who have a disability, who are trying to make ends meet with just social security income.”

Leandria Hall noted the differences between the HUD definition of homelessness and the definition from the McKinney-Vento Homeless Act. “We should address those most at risk,” Hall said, “but it is also clear that we as a community need to be more proactive to get care or resources to those that have been diverted from the street, particularly when that diversion has been short lived.”

The program continued with a presentation by Amy Scheuren explaining how diversion programs delay or prevent a legal declaration of homelessness based on the HUD definition.

“In the short term, Chester County can increase support, funding, and case management for diversion services,” Said Scheuran. “This funding and support should be flexible in nature due to the various difficult situations that residents find themselves in.”

In his call to action regarding Fair Housing Guidelines, Rob Henry reflected, “We need to work together to create a community in which ALL Chester County residents have fair, equal, and equitable access to housing opportunities and services to improve their health, quality of life, and financial stability. This event serves as an example of that work, but also how much work still remains to be done.”

In closing remarks, Mayor Peter Urscheler stated, “It is really up to each and every one of us to play a role in figuring out this (housing) challenge. This is a society challenge, and it will take all of us in the community working together.” Mayor Urscheler continued, “My dream is that you drive down the street and you can’t tell the difference in affordable or market rate housing because we should be a community.”

The event concluded with remarks from US Representative [Chrissy Houlahan](#).

“While access to quality and affordable housing is an issue across the county, it is particularly acute here in the 6th Congressional District, especially in Chester County,” she stated.

“The pathway to affordable housing begins with fairness and equity for all. The issue of equity and equality is not just an issue of the individual, it is in fact an economic issue for all of us, a health issue for all of us, and a human rights issue for all of us in the community.”

The legislative gathering was attended by the county’s legislative delegation, county officials, legislative staff, and nonprofit representatives:

Chester County Legislative Delegation and Elected Officials

- *US Representative Chrissy Houlahan, Pennsylvania 6th Congressional District*
- *Senator Katie Muth, 44th Senatorial District*
- *Rep. John Lawrence, 13th Legislative District*
- *Rep. Dan Williams, 74th Legislative District*
- *Mayor Lillian DeBaptiste, West Chester*
- *Mayor Peter Urscheler, Phoenixville*
- *Eden Ratliff, Manager, Kennett Township*

Chester County

- Commissioner Josh Maxwell, Vice Chair
- Robert Kagel, County Administrator
- Erik Walschburger, Deputy County Administrator
- Dolores Colligan, Director, Chester County Department of Community Development

Legislative Staff

- Tia L. Watson, Regional Director SEPA, US Senator Bob Casey
- Conor Johnston, Constituent Advocate, US Representative Chrissy Houlahan

- Ryan Beaston, Legislative Director, Senator Katie Muth
- Steve Warhola, Chief of Staff, Senator John Kane
- Michael Hartman, Chief of Staff, Senator Carolyn Comitta
- Ethan Shaffer, Constituent Services Director, Senator Carolyn Comitta
- Sara McCullough, Chief of Staff, Senator Tim Kearney
- Tyler Arkatin, Chief of Staff, Rep. Sappey

Nonprofit Representatives and Community Advocates

- Lynn Majarian, President Board of Directors, Kennett Area Community Service
- Lisa Teixeira, Member Board of Directors, Kennett Area Community Service
- Luis Tovar, Commissioner, Advisory Committee for Latino Affairs
- Jim Mercante, Member Steering Committee, Southern Chester County Opportunity Network
- Sara Pantazes, Director of Faith Formation, First Presbyterian Church of West Chester
- Rachel Lebus, Executive Director, Oxford Neighborhood Services
- Susan Tatelman Singer, Community Advocate
- Diego Reyes, Berkshire Hathaway Home Services
- Monte Woodward, Community Youth and Women's Alliance
- Alexandra Roa, Court Appointed Special Advocates of Delaware and Chester Counties

Participants and Organizers:

- Cheryl Miles, Chairwoman, Black Women of Chester County in Action
- Kris Keller, Executive Director, Orion Communities
- Wendy Gaynor, Orion Communities
- Dale Gravett, Executive Director, Housing Authority of Chester County
- Hallie Romanowski, Executive Director, ACT in Faith of Greater West Chester
- Leandria Hall, Program Director – Special Programs, Oxford Area Neighborhood Services
- Amy Scheuren, Program Director, Kennett Area Community Service
- Rob Henry, Administrator, Chester County Partnership to End Homelessness
- Lila Singleton, Community Youth and Women's Alliance
- Matie Johnson, Director of Programs, Home of the Sparrow

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