Creating Channels of Opportunity in Diverse & Emerging Homebuying Markets

Real Estate Agents, Lenders, and Housing Counselors Working Together through a Homeownership Collaborative

Washington, D.C.
Special Thanks to Our Sponsors...

Mortgage Bankers Association\(^1\), the National Housing Resource Center\(^2\), the National Association of Realtors\(^3\), the National Association of Hispanic Real Estate Professionals, the Asian Real Estate Association of America, HomeFree USA, National Council of La Raza, NID-HCA, Rural Community Assistance Corporation, Center for NYC Neighborhoods, Chhaya Community Development Corporation, HomeSmartNY, Housing Options & Planning Enterprises, Beyond Housing, and Neighborhood Housing Services of Greater Cleveland

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\(^1\) The Mortgage Bankers Association (MBA) is the national association representing the real estate finance industry, an industry that employs more than 280,000 people in virtually every community in the country. Headquartered in Washington, D.C., the association works to ensure the continued strength of the nation’s residential and commercial real estate markets; to expand homeownership; and to extend access to affordable housing to all Americans. MBA promotes fair and ethical lending practices and fosters professional excellence among real estate finance employees through a wide range of educational programs and a variety of publications. Its membership of over 2,200 companies includes all elements of real estate finance: mortgage companies, mortgage brokers, commercial banks, thrifts, REITs, Wall Street conduits, life insurance companies and others in the mortgage-lending field. For additional information, visit MBA’s website: www.mba.org.

\(^2\) The National Housing Resource Center (NHRC) is a housing policy program for nonprofit housing counseling agencies, networks, and Intermediaries. The Center advances public policies, programs, and strategies, which will strengthen the housing counseling community and benefit housing consumers. More information about NHRC is available at www.hsgcenter.org.

\(^3\) The National Association of REALTORS® is America’s largest trade association, representing 1.2 million members, including NAR’s institutes, societies, and councils, involved in all aspects of the residential and commercial real estate industries. Its membership is composed of residential and commercial brokers, salespeople, property managers, appraisers, counselors, and others engaged in the real estate industry. The term REALTOR® is a registered collective membership mark that identifies a real estate professional who is a member of the National Association of REALTORS® and subscribes to its strict Code of Ethics.
Housing Counseling

Housing counseling is a tremendous resource for consumers nationwide to receive free education and guidance on their path to homeownership, creating channels of opportunity that can improve the homebuyer experience and ultimately the state of the U.S. housing market. However, despite its many opportunities and benefits, housing counseling remains underutilized, as many homebuyers and sellers are not even aware that housing counseling services exist.

About the Homeownership Collaborative

In June 2016, to raise consumer awareness about how housing counseling can expand sustainable homeownership opportunities, a group of housing counselors, investors, lenders and Realtors® formed the Homeownership Collaborative. The Collaborative has been dedicated to hosting partnerships in local housing markets aimed at increasing homeownership opportunities by working with HUD-approved housing counseling agencies. See Exhibit A.

HUD Housing Counseling Program

Through the use of HUD-approved housing counseling agencies, the HUD Housing Counseling Program provides services to consumers who are seeking, financing, maintaining, renting, or owning a home—whether through a HUD program, a Veterans Affairs program, other Federal programs, a state or local program, or the regular private market. The Program also offers foreclosure assistance and addresses homelessness through counseling. HUD’s Housing Counseling Program enables consumers to receive the necessary guidance to make rent or mortgage payments, and to become responsible tenants or homeowners. HUD awards funding to HUD-approved housing counseling agencies and state housing finance agencies through over 20 grant programs that support HUD initiatives. For more information, please visit: https://portal.hud.gov/hudportal/HUD?src=/program_offices/housing/sfh/hcc.

The purpose of this report is to accurately convey the conversations of the stakeholder communities which held events in 2017 and to provide a template for how communities can effectively plan and hold events, and conduct appropriate follow-up.

Over a nine-month span—beginning in November 2016—the Collaborative tested ideas in four different markets with the intended purpose to explore a broader effort in the future. This report details findings from housing counseling events that took place in the following U.S. cities:

1. Cleveland, Ohio;
2. San Antonio, Texas;
3. Richmond, California; and
4. Brockton/Southeastern, Massachusetts.
These communities were selected based on geographic, socio-economic diversity, and local interest. Additionally, stakeholders from these communities and national sponsor organizations held a meeting to review the Collaborative’s efforts in July 2017, and this report also reflects the views expressed in that discussion.

Exhibit A: Collaborative Press Release

New Collaborative Launches Effort to Highlight Housing Counseling for Consumers

Jun 21, 2016

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WASHINGTON, D.C. (June 21, 2016) - Housing counseling is available to consumers across the country and represents a tremendous opportunity for those who need assistance on the path to homeownership, but too often, homebuyers and sellers are not even aware it exists.

A national collaboration of lenders, investors, real estate agents and housing counseling agencies announced today that they are joining forces to raise awareness of the opportunities and benefits of working with housing counseling agencies. The collaboration includes the Mortgage Bankers Association, the National Housing Resource Center, the National Association of Realtors®, the National Association of Hispanic Real Estate Professionals, the Asian Real Estate Association of America, HomeFree USA, National Council of La Raza, NID-HCA, Rural Community Assistance Corporation, Center for NYC Neighborhoods, Chhaya Community Development Corporation, HomeSmartNY, Housing Options & Planning Enterprises, Beyond Housing, and Neighborhood Housing Services of Greater Cleveland.

"MEI believes that housing counseling can play an important role in expanding homeownership opportunities," said MBA President and CEO David Stevens. "We look forward to being part of the forums so that lenders and other stakeholders can work toward solutions in this area."

To read the full release, visit: https://www.mba.org/2016-press-releases/june/new-collaborative-launches-effort-to-highlight-housing-counseling-for-consumers
Key Event Findings & Next Steps

Overall, the events were successful and well-attended, bringing together an average of 60 attendees with consistently strong representation from housing counselors, lenders, real estate agents and other stakeholders. In general, attendees at each of the events were highly engaged in discussion, appreciative of the opportunity to participate, and enthusiastic to keep the momentum going in a positive direction for their respective communities. As discussed at the Collaborative’s July 2017 review meeting in Washington, D.C., there were several overarching themes from each community event that emphasized a greater need for the following:

1. **Real estate agent awareness and involvement.** All communities expressed the enormous opportunities that existed for real estate agents and brokers in working with housing counseling agencies, and that agents and brokers were less informed about the opportunities to grow their businesses. Due to the lack of awareness and understanding of housing counseling among these groups, housing counselors need to inform the real estate industry about the range of housing counseling services, downpayment assistance, and homebuyer benefits from their work.

2. **Grassroots advocacy efforts.** Greater grassroots advocacy is necessary and needs to be directed at affordable housing options at the state and local levels. Additionally, this series of local meetings, which brought together a diverse group of local stakeholders, was viewed as significant catalyst for starting and advancing those advocacy efforts. In fact, in one instance, the meeting’s discussion helped build a bridge between opposing views on current pending legislation. Combined advocacy by real estate agents, lenders, and housing groups can be highly effective in lobbying local government and state legislatures for affordable housing.

3. **Social media presence.** The use of social media by housing counseling agencies is simply underutilized and an improved, multi-faceted strategy needs to be developed. If—as the national group concluded—real estate agents and brokers need more information/education about the opportunities of working with housing counseling agencies and their clients, it is important that housing counseling agencies are present in the ways that these agents and brokers do business and spend their work days. It was also suggested by the national stakeholders at this meeting that planners use local and state real estate agent/broker social media outlets to promote future housing counseling events. Stakeholders agreed the most efficient and effective way to achieve positive results would be to take advantage of social media tools (i.e. filming short videos of their clients and posting the content to their online outlets), in addition to offering social media training to new homebuyers and partners, and developing toolkits for older generations who may not be as familiar with how to best use these platforms. Greater emphasis should be placed on increasing consumer awareness of existing counseling resources for homebuyers who are seeking housing counseling services.
4. **Engagement with Housing Finance Agencies.** We believe that there are unique opportunities for housing counseling agencies and other stakeholders to collaborate with state and local housing finance agencies (HFAs) on efforts to reach first-time homebuyers. Given the special focus of HFAs, which is to assist first-time and low- to moderate-income buyers, housing counseling can work as both an awareness/marketing component as well as a risk mitigation tool. These partnerships have the potential to align real estate professionals, lenders, counseling agencies, and HFAs in a shared strategy to reach new and underserved borrowers...with all of the stakeholders complementing the other.

**Exhibit B: 2017 Review Meeting in Washington, D.C.**
Event Overview & Key Takeaways
Each event offered unique insights that will be valuable in identifying ways to bridge the information gap that exists between housing counselors, and the homebuyers and sellers who can benefit from their services.

The Cleveland Housing Counseling Event created committees to educate real estate agents and lenders on how to effectively use the downpayment assistance programs and housing counseling programs and to sponsor a homebuyer fair in an underserved, affordable neighborhood. Participants highlighted the need to identify sustainable sources of funding for housing counseling and to have greater representation from large banks and real estate agents at future events.

The San Antonio Housing Counseling Event emphasized the importance of framing housing counseling as a useful resource not only for first-time homebuyers and those with less formal education, but also for professionals and existing homeowners as well. There was also a concern about the difficulties in finding affordable homes for moderate-income homebuyers, especially when competing with cash-buyers.

At the Richmond Housing Counseling Event, there was discussion of the area's higher-priced market. This led to a lot of interest in broadening the acceptance of downpayment assistance among real estate agents, and mortgage brokers and lenders, so that owner-occupant offers will not be dismissed in favor of cash-buyers or investors. Despite the strength and depth of services of housing counseling agencies in the area, many lenders and real estate agents in attendance were not aware of the offerings and local outreach initiatives.

It was a slightly different case at the Brockton/Southeastern Massachusetts Housing Counseling Event, as the use of housing counselors is more engrained among lenders but not as much with real estate agents. Despite the reported higher utilization of homeownership counseling in Massachusetts compared to other states, the meeting was still viewed as a unique gathering for different groups to come together all at once and to plan for future collaboration. Committees were formed for affordable housing advocacy, educating homebuyers on affordable purchase/rehabilitation loan opportunities, and training real estate agents in the licensing and continuing education programs on working with housing counseling agencies.

For more details on each event, please see Case Studies beginning on Page 11.
Template Event Program

Stakeholders involved with the Collaborative’s first housing counseling event in Cleveland, Ohio, collaborated in creating an agenda and program that was used as a template in future events. The planning process for each event consisted of the national sponsors hosting weekly conference calls with local stakeholders which began six weeks before the planned date. Special consideration was given to choosing a time which did not conflict with local, state or national real estate agent/broker events. The calls identified a venue (and any costs); sought sponsors; developed a speaking program; identified presenters; assembled an event invite and RSVP mechanism (RSVP’s were through Survey Monkey); event promotion to lenders and real estate agents, and recruited other agents and brokers.

Generally, the elements of the meeting agendas were:

- **Opening Remarks.** Welcome remarks and opening comments were made from national and state sponsor groups, and the housing counseling agencies.
- **Brief Presentations.** All participating housing counseling agencies delivered short presentations on their organization’s approach and processes. Many also highlighted successful projects in which they were involved and downpayment assistance. On a couple of occasions, this portion of the program also included other related stakeholders.
- **Key Testimonials.** At least three key testimonials about housing counseling were shared to establish the value of the programs:
  1. Real estate agent/broker discussion of how they have personally achieved success through their work with potential buyers and housing counseling agencies;
  2. Lender testimonial about their strategies to help consumers by partnering with housing counseling agencies and encouraging use of the available programs;
  3. Consumer explanation of the important help they received during the home-buying process from a housing counselor.
- **Discussion.** A period of moderated discussion on how to create local momentum, future gatherings and effective solutions that would continue after the meeting.
- **Lunch Break.** The group would then break for lunch, but would pose for a group picture that could be used for future communications.

In two cities, committees had been formed during the open discussion, broke up into smaller groups to work through lunch. The testimonials by lenders, real estate agents, and buyers were compelling high points in the meetings and served to galvanize support.

MBA provided supplemental materials at each of the four events, including: a promotional flyer; a step-by-step instruction sheet on how to locate a housing counselor working with a HUD-approved housing counseling agency; and a list of housing counseling agencies located in or near the host city. **See Exhibits C and D.**
San Antonio Housing Counseling Event

Realtors, Housing Counselors and Mortgage Lenders!

Discover how to access a pipeline of ready, willing and able buyers
Learn how to successfully work with local housing counseling agencies.
Gain knowledge on down payment assistance and other programs
Meet and engage with other San Antonio industry professionals

Friday, April 7, 2017
10:00 am – 1:00 pm
The Meadows at Bentley Drive
Learning Center, 8004 Bentley Drive
San Antonio, TX 78218

FREE LUNCH PROVIDED!

SEATS ARE LIMITED! RSVP TODAY!
https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/SanAntonio0407
Exhibit D: Locating Housing Counselors Near You

**Option 1: via CFPB**

The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau’s search engine provides a quick and easy way to locate housing counselors in your immediate area. These steps will guide you to a list of the 10 housing counseling agencies closest to your zip code, regardless of agency focus. Agency contact information, location, counseling services, languages spoken, etc. will also be provided.

- **Step 1:** Go to [www.consumerfinance.gov/find-a-housing-counselor](http://www.consumerfinance.gov/find-a-housing-counselor).
- **Step 2:** Enter your zip code where specified and click the “Find a counselor” button.

**Option 2: via HUD**

The Department of Housing and Urban Development’s advanced search option allows for a more tailored approach to finding a housing counselor, based on particular needs. These steps will guide you to a filtered list of housing counseling agencies within your state that match your selected criteria. Agency name, location (by city and zip code), counseling services, languages spoken, etc. may be focused upon.

- **Step 1:** Go to [www.hud.gov](http://www.hud.gov).
- **Step 2:** Under “Resources” on the Home page, select “HUD Approved Housing Counseling Agencies.”

- **Step 3:** On the following page, select a state from the list and click the “Go to this page” link, or click on a state from the map provided. Then, select “Click here to narrow your search” to better tailor your results.
Case Studies:
Housing Counseling Events

This report goes on to provide specific summaries from each of the four housing counseling events in the order they occurred: 1. Cleveland, Ohio; 2. San Antonio, Texas; 3. Richmond, California; and, 4. Brockton/Southeastern, Massachusetts.
Notes:
Discussion at this event highlighted a greater need for the following:

- Outreach to and involvement from real estate agents in the planning process, and the potential inclusion from associations such as the National Association of Hispanic Real Estate Professionals (NAHREP), the National Association of Real Estate Brokers (NAREB) and the Asian Real Estate Association of America (AREAA);

- Representation from large banks, which can help provide funding for future housing counseling events.

The National Association of Realtors® had offered funding for an event of $5,000; the lenders in the room collectively believed that amount would not be sufficient and several wanted to contribute more. A recommendation was to include this as an agenda item for a potential committee. As previously mentioned, a topic that went unaddressed was the need to identify sustainable sources of ongoing funding for these types of events going forward.

It was noted that the downpayment presentations and materials sparked valuable questions and spurred engagement. The validators seemed to add more color and value, and presented with a sincerity that resonated well with the audience.
Additionally, to aid promotional efforts for the Collaborative’s initiative, the following ideas were raised in discussion:

- Offer to make presentations at local churches, real estate offices, etc.;
- Emphasize the need for open and ongoing communication among lenders, real estate agents, and counselors regarding the status of the client. For instance, if a real estate agent is not being informed about a downpayment assistance application, it can trigger an extra inspection and cause delay in the closing process;
- Sustain ongoing dialogue between experienced professionals to help address common problems and create opportunities for approaching policymakers about improving the processes, such as those related to downpayment assistance and lead paint inspection requirements.

**Action Items / Next Steps:**

- **Form an education committee** tasked with preparing lenders and real estate agents on the “ins and outs” of housing counseling and downpayment assistance.

- **Form an event planning committee** responsible for aiding in the creative development of future housing counseling-related events for the local industry and/or homebuyers.

In terms of immediate next steps for the aforementioned groups, the education committee would focus on establishing a “stakeholder event” (i.e., how to continue reaching out to Ohio real estate agents, lenders and counselors about the benefit of housing counseling for the homebuyer), while the planning committee would organize a housing counseling fair for prospective homebuyers in order to help Ohio consumers with various elements of housing counseling, such as budgeting help, home-buying process education, language assistance, etc.

Leaders for each of the committees were identified at the housing counseling event.

**Acknowledgements:**

Thank you to the following organizations for participating in the planning and hosting of this event:

- Empowering and Strengthening Ohio's People (ESOP)
- Neighborhood Housing Services of Greater Cleveland
- Ohio Association of Realtors®
- Ohio Mortgage Bankers Association
San Antonio Housing Counseling Event
April 2017

Notes:
The San Antonio Housing Counseling Event was filled with good-will and energy. Once a few volunteers spoke up, the discussion was lively and incisive. Lenders and others in attendance voluntarily offered to host future events. To sustain ongoing efforts, it was recommended that this type of request be included in the opening remarks at future events.

One lesson from this event was the need for a strong meeting moderator. For example, the conversation drifted a couple of times away from the intended focus of getting more consumers into the programs and had to be steered back to that central theme. Additionally, the transition from the presentations and testimonials to the discussion portion needed to be moderated with an emphasis that this should be owned on a local basis going forward.

Action Items / Next Steps:
- **Form a committee to work with investors in the area.** Due to the fast pace of neighborhood revitalization in San Antonio investors tend to work with buyers who can move on homes more quickly (i.e. the all-cash types), adversely impacting lower-income individuals who are priced out. This committee would identify these investors and discuss opportunities around developing more affordable housing in these neighborhoods (expressed as “getting ahead of the flippers”).
• **Host a housing counseling fair to provide consumers with easier access.** Many in the room suggested that a campaign focused on the community was necessary to raise awareness of the opportunities housing counseling offers to consumers and the industry.
  ➢ A committee was formed to work on a housing counseling fair that would bring in lenders, real estate agents, and housing counselors, giving consumers access to all groups at one time.

• **Develop a single resource to house accessible information on housing counselors in the community.** To improve accessibility and efficiency, attendees discussed the need for a single comprehensive online resource that would provide lenders and real estate agents with information on a community’s available housing counseling services, as well as advice on how to connect with a counselor. It was also suggested that the different groups come up with a campaign name to use as a label for all of the housing counseling agencies featured on the website.
  ➢ A committee was formed and tasked with developing a website where each housing counseling agency in San Antonio could maintain/update its respective organization’s information.

• **Increase advocacy efforts to gain resources dedicated to creating affordable housing.** While not directly focused on the specific task of increasing more utilization of housing counseling, attendees felt that a key issue locally was the City’s current spending of HUD Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) funds and that more was needed to create an increase in affordable housing.
  ➢ A committee was formed to develop a strategy for how to access more funding in general (i.e. out of state or federal sources) and from the City in particular.

• **Housing counseling should not only be advertised for first-time homebuyers and those with less education.** Some in the room suggested the need for counseling to existing homeowners who are doing renovations and do not know how to access credit for those needs. Additionally, it is important to note that professionals have been housing counseling clients in order to receive budgetary and financial planning guidance.

**Acknowledgements:**
Thank you to the following organizations for participating in the planning and hosting of this event:

- Alamo Community Group
- Neighborhood Housing Services of San Antonio
- Our Casas Resident Council
- Texas Association of Realtors®
- Texas Mortgage Bankers Association
Notes:
The Bay Area housing counseling agencies that participated in the Richmond Housing Counseling Event were motivated, showcased strong leadership, and appeared to have a variety of offerings that are making a difference in the lives of consumers they serve.

While a few lenders and real estate agents in the room knew of the offerings and local outreach initiatives by these agencies, a majority did not. There was great value in the questions asked by attendees, and in the subsequent networking among lenders, real estate agents and counselors. Therefore, this event aimed at connecting more lenders and real estate agents to these agencies had great merit.

While there has rightfully been a heavy focus on low-to-moderate income borrowers at previous events (as well as in the Richmond event), attendees expressed that housing counseling opportunities should be focused more on broader borrower types (e.g., “first-time, well-funded borrowers” or millennial-aged borrowers with strong incomes, who have the capacity to buy a home but may not know how to begin the process – this is prevalent in the Bay Area with the tech industry). Going forward, greater consideration should be allocated to how these events are framed from a goals/objectives perspective. It was evident that the housing counseling agencies in this community were providing great value to their local borrower base. In similarly-positioned communities, the emphasis needs to be that these events are not being held to “start a local movement” but to “buttress existing efforts” and “recruit more boots on the ground.”
A recommendation for future events was to determine committee leaders the day of rather than post-event in order determine if an action item is truly attainable by the local community.

Following the conclusion of the event, a survey was sent to attendees to recruit volunteers for: service on the above committees; and service as a committee leader.

**Action Items / Next Steps:**

- **Establish a committee to organize a local homebuyer event for nearby Vallejo, California.** The understanding was that this committee would start with Vallejo, which was underserved, and then consider event development in other Bay Area locations. Multiple marketing tracks would be key in order to bring together all in need of counseling (e.g., low-to-moderate, millennial buyers, etc.).

- **Establish a committee to educate the local public on home-buying opportunities and housing counseling.** This will include: outreach to the public on home-buying; educating about downpayment assistance programs (DPAs); and related use of social media.

- **Establish a committee to address barriers and challenges on the use of homeownership programs,** such as the perception by lenders that the California Housing Finance Agency DPA was structured in a way that put the lender in violation of CFPB regulations. The understanding was that this would serve as an advocacy committee before local policymakers (where applicable) as well as local industry (i.e., trying to get lenders to streamline their approach to DPA programs in the community so that the CFPB’s views are adhered to across businesses/business models). To be successful in this regard, efforts will need to be done in conjunction with existing housing counseling agencies, local governments, and lenders.

- **Establish a committee to prioritize owner-occupant buyers in the local home-buying marketplace.** Two issues that came up at the event were sellers or seller agents not accepting FHA and VA offers, and not accepting DPA deals. Investors v. owner-occupants—like in San Antonio—is a tough issue in the Bay Area. Innovative ideas are strongly encouraged in this space to make more buyers using government programs successful.

- **Establish a committee to develop strategies to address the vacant lots and vacant houses in Richmond.** Plenty of homebuyer opportunities exist in Richmond if city programs can be developed.
Brockton/Southeastern Massachusetts Housing Counseling Event
July 2017

Notes:
As previously mentioned, housing counseling awareness among mortgage lenders was high in the area due to the state statute that requires mortgage lenders to comply with a state-level Community Reinvestment Act in Massachusetts, and the existing 52 agency partnership of the Homeownership Collaborative.

Since its inception in December 1996, the Massachusetts Homeownership Collaborative has brought together the major stakeholders in the Massachusetts homeownership field. The Massachusetts Homeownership Collaborative established a "Collaborative Seal of Approval" to recognize Massachusetts homebuyer counseling agencies that meet or exceed a minimum standard in providing effective pre-purchase, group homebuyer counseling and education to low and moderate income, first-time homebuyers. The Massachusetts Homeownership Collaborative also promotes an ongoing dialogue among lenders, real estate professionals, homebuyer counselors, government officials and others supporting homebuyer education.

Although Massachusetts has a number of organizations involved in this space, the maze of similar sounding names and aligned missions can be confusing to even industry professionals trying to discern the unique roles of each. It was suggested that this can be even more dumbfounding for first-time homebuyers and other clients who are in the greatest need for housing counseling. The conversation included how the “Buy Brockton” program (a public/private partnership between the City of Brockton, Brockton Housing Partnership, and local businesses promoting homeownership in Brockton) was helping to provide a single resource to clarify each of these organizations and the different roles in an easy way for
Acknowledgements:

Thank you to the following organizations for participating in the planning and hosting of this event:

- California Association of Realtors®
- California Mortgage Bankers Association
- Community Housing Development Corporation
- Eden Housing
- NID-Housing Counseling Agency
- Richmond Neighborhood Housing Services
consumers to access (See: http://www.buybrockton.org/housing-resources.aspx).

There was a discussion about the need for more coordination among the many groups in advocacy for increasing affordable housing. A positive outcome of the meeting is an agreement to look for affordable housing issues which both financial services industry members and housing advocates could jointly support in the state legislature. There was a brief debate regarding the differences of opinion over support for state legislation to increase Community Preservation Act funding. These funds come from real estate transaction taxes/fees, and there were different views as to whether or not existing funds are being used as intended. This is a topic for the advocacy committee. It was also suggested that the State Treasurer could be a potential partner given their public statements to improve consumer financial education. Lastly, there was also a suggestion that the group should reach out to the State Attorney General’s HomeCorps office to explore how to help consumers facing financial challenges retain their homes.

Additionally, what some in the group appeared to admit was one of their great challenges is building on each group’s existing organizational programs, partnerships and expertise as well as bridging the gap among groups with these talents and offerings. The value of the conversation, encouraged the President of the Massachusetts Association Realtors® to express an interest in holding similar events in Worcester, Springfield, Lawrence and Lowell. It was also reported that another impediment to using housing counseling was a hesitancy by lenders and real estate agents to send a consumer to housing counseling due to the fear of potentially losing their client to a different broker or lender. Many in the room spoke to the prohibitions on steering in counseling sessions. Nevertheless, the group thought more could be done to make them aware of the steering prohibitions.

Unlike other states where the Collaborative has held meetings, there is already a very good web-based list of housing counseling agencies operating in Massachusetts, which is maintained by the Citizens Housing and Planning Association (CHAPA: https://www.chapa.org/looking-housing/homebuyer-counseling-agencies). The list is available in several different languages. The homebuyer education schedule provided by CHAPA and the Homeownership Collaborative contains pre-purchase and post-purchase courses for first-time homebuyers offered by agencies with a Seal of Approval certification from the Massachusetts Homeownership Collaborative. The list is available in several different languages. This listing was much more the focus of conversation than either the CFPB or HUD website guides to locating counseling agencies.

MassHousing’s Road Home Program, which is approved by CHAPA, appeared to be widely used and recognized by all groups. The Road Home Program is an online course, and its establishment was reported to have removed the inconsistencies that existed at the time in the different courses. In a related note, most of the agencies reported that when unable to conduct their counseling in-person they used this program and supplemented with follow-up calls or meetings to ensure the client had absorbed the material and taken appropriate action (such as creating a household budget or paying off excessive debts).
Action Items / Next Steps:
At this event, it was agreed upon to establish the following four committees to follow-up and keep the momentum going in a positive direction:

- Real Estate Agent Engagement;
- Public Awareness and Outreach;
- Advocacy for Affordable Housing; and,
- Homebuyer Education on Purchase and Rehab Housing Products.

Attendees also agreed to collaborate to create a continuing education course for Massachusetts-licensed real estate agents that would go into great detail on the housing counseling process and how to work with the existing agencies in the state. This development was widely viewed as a potential game-changer in the state, as real estate agents at the meeting suggested that the challenge to spurring greater use of housing counseling agencies comes from a level of unfamiliarity among some real estate professionals.

In this high-priced market, the less expensive properties require substantial rehabilitation. MassHousing has a purchase rehab product, and one of the committees will work on educating buyers about the availability and opportunity to use this product and explore support for homebuyers in the contracting process.

Looking Ahead
It is proposed that each of these organizations will be responsible for executing all aspects of a housing counseling event in a specified local market in the second year of the initiative. As host, the designated organization will be expected to lead all organizational and operational efforts, soliciting guidance and support from the planning group as necessary. MBA will volunteer to host a housing counseling event in the D.C., Maryland and Virginia area. A call to discuss specifics will be organized.

Acknowledgements:
Thank you to the following organizations for participating in the planning and hosting of this event:

- Brockton Housing Partnership
- Citizens Housing and Planning Association (CHAPA)
- Massachusetts Affordable Housing Alliance
- Massachusetts Association of Realtors ®
- Massachusetts Mortgage Bankers Association
- Massachusetts Mortgage Bankers Association Foundation
- MassHousing
- NeighborWorks, Southern Massachusetts