THE CONSUMER HEALTH FOUNDATION (CHF) HELD A SERIES OF SIX MEETINGS IN DECEMBER 2012 – JANUARY 2013 that brought together grantees and select key nonprofit stakeholders to meet CHF’s new President/CEO, Dr. Yanique Redwood.
The meetings were set up by jurisdiction – D.C., Prince George’s County, Montgomery County, and Northern Virginia. At the outset of each meeting, people introduced themselves and shared their organization’s mission. Following introductions, Yanique shared her personal story and key moments that have shaped her commitment to equity and justice and drew her to the work of CHF. She then invited questions and also asked the following questions of the group:

**What keeps you up at night?**

**What external challenges are you facing in your work?**

**What gets you out of bed in the morning?**

**What is inspiring you in your work?**

We are using the findings from these conversations to help shape our programmatic strategy in 2014–2016.

The following regional themes emerged in all six meetings:

We are living in times of rapid change – demographically, geographically, economically and politically.

We live in a divided region. There is incredible affluence and diversity in this region, but also incredible poverty and persistent discrimination around race and class. Given the tremendous wealth of resources in our region, we could be doing a much better job of addressing poverty and poor health.

There are a number of opportunities that we can capitalize on to be more effective in our social change work:

★ **We need to confront issues of race/racism and class/classism.**

★ **We need to ground our programs, organizational practices, and policy and systems changes in the voices and lived experiences of individuals and families. We also need to build political power or political will in the region through engaging and organizing communities.**

★ **We need to create new forms of collaboration or alignment among government, nonprofits, civic organizations and businesses. There is an opportunity to more deeply engage with the business community.**

★ **We need to create a regional vision for change.**

There is a sense of optimism, hope and a “can do” spirit that we can draw upon to make the region a better place to live for all.
The District has experienced extraordinary growth and change, demographically and economically. There is concern that segregation and discrimination persist today with growing income inequality that cuts along racial lines. Low-income communities of color have not benefitted from the economic growth and development in the District in recent years. Poverty in the city is deep and invisible with 140,000 of the 630,000 residents needing food assistance. Discussions about the District’s demographics must go beyond “black and white” and be more inclusive of the city’s immigrant communities.

The District has been and continues to be a transient city. This has an impact on civic engagement and attention to issues affecting the city. The significant influx of new residents, estimated to be thousands a month, deserves attention and could also be viewed as an opportunity. Many young people new to the city can be engaged as social justice allies and activists.

Race and racism are complicated subjects in DC but need to be more openly discussed and addressed. As one leader noted, “race is insidious and racial dynamics may be compromising our success.”
Leaders are hopeful about the ability to make change in the District.

The District’s political environment is unique because of its status as a federal city. The District does not have voting rights representation in Congress or budget autonomy. In addition, there have been deep cuts in government spending but a lack of awareness of the real impact these cuts have on low-income families. There is also frustration around a lack of coordination among agencies.

The nonprofit community in the District is a fragile eco-system. There are challenges around coordination between and among nonprofits and with government. The lack of funding for local work is a special challenge because the presence of national nonprofits in DC may affect local nonprofits’ ability to raise funds from national foundations. However, the role of national nonprofits in local issues is seen as both a challenge and an opportunity.

Leaders are hopeful about the ability to make change in the District. The District is a relatively small place that is rich in resources – money, ideas, progressive politics, young people who are bright and energetic, and unlimited pro bono support. This creates an opportunity for new alliances. There is also excitement around initiatives like the Promise Neighborhood that can help us to “think and work smarter.” Others pointed to the resilience and caretaking of extended family networks.
Prince George’s County

[ KEY TAKEAWAYS ]

Prince George’s County has undergone significant demographic, economic and political change.

Prince George’s County is the wealthiest black county in the country. At the same time, more and more people who are seeking affordable housing outside of the District are moving to Prince George’s County. Nonprofit leaders acknowledged that there is a need for a regional vision to address poverty, and the County needs to reverse its historical lack of investment in a social safety net.

Since the recession, nonprofits have seen families in desperate economic circumstances due to educational and economic disparities. There has been an increase in youth hunger and homelessness. Prince George’s was the hardest hit county in the region with respect to foreclosures. It has one of the highest numbers of uninsured residents in Maryland, and there are not enough primary care clinics or physicians.

The County’s nonprofit infrastructure was fragile before the recession, and as one participant noted, “there was no safety net for the nonprofit sector.” Since the recession, long-standing nonprofits in the County has gone out of business.
Residents stood in line for 4 hours to cast their votes for the 2012 presidential elections.

In spite of the depth of the challenges facing the County, many nonprofit leaders expressed hope in the County’s nonprofit, civic and political leadership. The current County Executive’s Transforming Neighborhood Initiative is seen as an important step in taking a more holistic and multi-sector approach to meeting the needs of low-income families and communities. The County’s 10 year plan to end homelessness was also cited as an example of a successful collaboration among a range of key stakeholders in the County.

Nonprofit leaders were also excited about some of the big opportunities on the horizon. The implementation of the Affordable Care Act will help thousands of residents get access to affordable health care coverage. Federal immigration reform may address gaps in coverage for undocumented residents. Minimum wage legislation that was introduced in the legislature this session could help address poverty.

The County has an opportunity to capitalize on the spirit of civic engagement that was sparked during the 2012 presidential elections. As one leader noted, residents in Oxon Hill stood in line for 4 hours to cast their votes – and that was for early voting. The faith community in the County was also referenced as being active in some social change efforts.
Montgomery County

KEY TAKEAWAYS

One of Montgomery County’s greatest assets is its ethical and accountable leadership in government.

Montgomery County has incredible affluence – it is a place rich in intellectual and financial resources, and its school system is seen as a strength. It is also seen as a progressive county that is willing to commit its resources to help those most in need. “So why isn’t the County a trend setter?” one nonprofit leader asked. Unclear targets and goals around advocacy, an inability to take efforts to scale, and a lack of collaboration were offered as potential reasons for the disconnect.

While the county takes great pride in its multiculturalism, there are diverse communities that remain hidden in plain view. Historically African-American communities are not fully engaged. Immigrant communities are facing unmet language access needs. The County’s view of itself as an integrated place may overshadow the unique needs and perspectives of its diverse racial and ethnic communities.

Issues at the intersection of class and race were also cited as a challenge. There is a lack of diversity among decision-makers and others with power and influence. There also seems to be some fear around confronting issues of racism and classism.
One community leader noted that the county takes a service-based approach in their relationships and work with low-income communities. This was described as “connecting with adults around need, not potential.” This is particularly troubling when many low-income immigrants in the County have been educated in their home country and have valuable skills and a spirit of entrepreneurialism.

The county also has a strong history of supporting the nonprofit sector. Montgomery County had almost 500 contracts with nonprofits valued at nearly $97 million. At the same time, questions were raised about whether the contractual relationships between the Council, government agencies and nonprofits in the County might at times be “mutually self-protective.” This could hamper advocacy efforts or innovation. There may be an opportunity to develop new forms of relationships that could drive innovation in government.

What excited nonprofit leaders most was the idea of rallying around a big vision. One leader said it plainly, “I can imagine eliminating poverty in Montgomery County.” The key to achieving the vision is better coordination among all key stakeholders in the County. The business community was seen as an important missing link in current efforts.
Northern Virginia

[ KEY TAKEAWAYS ]

There is a widely shared perspective that Northern Virginia has great wealth and affluence, that it is the economic engine for the state, and it has weathered the recession quite well.

WHAT IS OFTEN LEFT OUT OF THE CONVERSATION IS THAT NORTHERN Virginia has significant pockets of poverty. For example, Fairfax County has the highest number of low-income people in the state. There is an affordable housing crisis in Alexandria and Arlington that is forcing people to move south to communities like Stafford and Richmond. There are high rates of unemployment and significant challenges with transportation infrastructure that connects to jobs.

THERE IS A HISTORY OF POLITICAL DISENFRANCHISEMENT AMONG communities of color in Virginia – a sense of not having power or access to systems. Immigrant communities have faced hostile public policies related to documentation and legal status and many residents fear deportation. For African Americans, there is a sense of hopelessness – a sense that “nothing’s going to change.”

IT IS A CHALLENGE TO ORGANIZE AND BUILD POWER IN NORTHERN VIRGINIA because it is such a big region. As one leader said, “you can’t have one meeting for all of Northern Virginia.”
Important groundwork has been laid to build advocacy capacity in the state.

The relationship between Virginia’s geographic and political environment is challenging. There is a “north/south” divide in the state, and the “Dillon rule” centralizes power and money in state government versus local government. For example, local cities and counties are banned from collecting local income tax, so instead they tax property, goods and services. These taxes are regressive and disproportionately impact low-income residents.

Overall Virginia is a highly affluent state, but it continues to rank at the bottom of the nation in its provision of human services. An example of this is Virginia’s Medicaid program. The state is ranked 48th in the country in terms of Medicaid spending, and it has decided not to implement the Medicaid expansion through federal health reform. Virginia also has a 10 year ban on legal immigrants’ access to Medicaid, which is double the federal 5 year ban. For those who do have access to Medicaid, it is very difficult to find physicians willing to accept it.

The 2012 presidential election and the upcoming 2013 gubernatorial election are creating opportunities for a renewed sense of civic engagement in Virginia. Important groundwork has been laid to build advocacy capacity in the state, and more and more people and communities are involved in conversations, particularly with local elected officials.
Community

As part of the Consumer Health Foundation’s strategic planning process, we met with community residents living in southeast DC and Montgomery County, MD. The community meetings were organized in partnership with Safe Places for the Advancement of Community and Equity (SPACES).

Background

Residents in the southeast DC community live in public housing. Due to redevelopment, more than half of the units are now vacant. More than 60 families remain in the property and many have been residents for more than 20 years. The residents formed a council which successfully advocated for assistance to families who were relocated. It also organized a women’s support group and an arts program.

Residents in Montgomery County live in a senior housing building which is owned and operated by a for-profit company. The residents have organized a council which sponsored a speaker series and created arts programs. Both councils have a strong commitment to supporting the residents and improving their communities.

Community Needs and Community Action

Two major themes emerged from the meetings with residents, namely the need for:

- Community organizing, and
- Community building

The participants emphasized the need for residents to work together to advocate for themselves and develop unity in order to improve their communities.

Residents in southeast DC emphasized the need for programs that would:

- Address basic needs, such as employment and access to healthy food
- Offer more support for parents
- Provide mentoring and other activities for youth, especially for boys and men.

Residents in Montgomery County were especially concerned about the following:

- Better public transportation facilities to and from their community
- Need for federal government programs that will address the increasing cost of living
- Health care access for those who do not yet qualify for Medicare
- Better access to primary and specialty care.