

July 6, 2018

Maple Avenue Immigrant Resident Interviews Takoma Park

During the month of April 2018 CHEER volunteers and staff conducted resident interviews to get feedback on what immigrant residents appreciate about where they live, what challenges they face, and what they would like to see change. Two individuals, Enku Taye and Betelhem Abebe, conducted interviews in the Maple Avenue area of Takoma Park. Enku interviewed 9 residents on the street, and at Piney Branch Elementary School's playground where a lot of different age group of people share the place for personal, and group activities. Betelhem interviewed 5 residents of Essex House in their apartments. These interviews were conducted in English and Amharic. Below is a summary of what residents expressed.

Appreciation for Takoma Park

Everyone interviewed said they were happy to live in Takoma Park City. The following reasons were frequently mentioned.

- The area is peaceful and safe.
- There is good access to local transportation.
- Many walkable areas are available around.
- The playground is quiet and safe for exercise, relaxing and refreshing.
- Maple Avenue is near to the city/downtown area.
- Valuable services, such as the hospital, schools, library, police station, farmer's markets etc. are reachable.
- Rental Housing is more affordable than the surrounding areas.
- Many like that Takoma Park is so diverse. This helps them to share different ideas and exposes them to other cultures, which allows them to grow as a community.

Washington Adventist Hospital's proximity is something the community really appreciates because it is convenient for emergency reasons and more. Also, the fact that parents can walk to their children's school is a great relief for some parents who lack transportation, this also encourages and gives them a chance to be more involved in their kid's daily school activities. Moreover, most people feel that they are close to nature. They and their family members like the green vegetation and enjoy breathing the fresh air generally. Children are also excited to see lots of different birds and deer.

Unmet Needs, Challenges and Suggestions

The major concerns or unmet needs among Maple Avenue community mentioned in the interviews are listed below.

- There is no affordable day care for under school aged children. This forces many mothers to be stay at home mothers.
- There is no social service office, such as the TESS center in Long Branch that is walkable.
- Affordable grocery stores in walkable proximity are in high demand, especially for non-drivers.
- There is a need for a recreation center which can provide indoor and outdoor activities for kids of all ages in all weather conditions. Stay at home moms need places to bring their pre-school children, School aged children need after school and summer activities. It would also be good if this could include a low cost physical fitness center.
- Additional park facilities are needed. The park behind Piney Branch Elementary School is too crowded and the facilities at this park should also be provided at other parks. For example, the skate park has too many users, younger children don't get an opportunity to use it. Also the drinking fountain at the park behind Piney Branch elementary school does not work.

There are many stay-at-home parents in this area. Due to lack of the above resources, most immigrant children, and stay at home mothers are struggling with depression, obesity, and other health challenges due to the stresses of fulfilling personal and family goals. Some mentioned that they wish there was an information location/center that is provided in the area or in their apartment building somewhere so they can look for events that take place in the community. Some mentioned having a support group in the community so everyone can share ideas and ask questions to better their daily life. Others indicated a need for free homework and reading clubs for kids after school. In addition, there was a suggestion for an organized community-based parent meeting. Many of the adults are interested in discussing about how to get access to education opportunities, steps on how to apply for financial aid, housing issues such as how to get started as a first time home owner, and many more issues.

Although rents in Takoma Park are low compared to the surrounding areas, some families still struggle with meeting housing costs. For example, some of the Maple Avenue community members need support to cover their utility bills. Housing Opportunity was also mentioned. People interviewed would rather live in townhouses than multi-family buildings. That life style is much preferred. However, there are not enough townhouse opportunities in Takoma Park. The Townhouses need to offer 3 bedrooms and be made affordable to the families living here.

Finally, many parents at Essex House, complained that they have been smelling people smoking in the apartments. This is a health issue. Many of the parents are concerned that this can affect their infants.