STORIES OF
CHALLENGES & HOPE
IN EAST PALO ALTO

OUR APPROACH, SUMMARY,
AND CALL TO ACTION

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REPORT AUTHORS
Elisabeth Landa | Ellen Lehman | Shauntrice Martin | Avani Patel, Ed.D. | Anna Waring, Ph.D.

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East Palo Alto and eastern Menlo Park are communities that are often hidden or left out of the bustling of Silicon Valley. The community is trying its best to face the tide of extreme gentrification; it’s also had a long history of exclusion, injustice and disproportionate challenges. We wanted to understand what life is like in East Palo Alto, and if there are ways we can better support residents.

In the spring of 2016, the Peery Foundation, in partnership with Eastside College Preparatory School, Aspire Schools in East Palo Alto, Foundation for a College Education, and Silicon Valley Urban Debate League, had in-depth interviews with 31 families and held 4 focus groups with families living in East Palo Alto and eastern Menlo Park. In total, we connected with more than 70 residents of the community. The goal was to capture residents’ impressions of the community and the ways it is changing, identify the factors contributing to those changes, and better understand the current needs and desires of the community. In addition, we wanted to offer the families a platform to share their raw stories and emotions with a broader audience so those working in and supporting the community can deeply consider changes, shifts, or pivots in strategy, programs and/or services to make them as responsive and effective as possible.

Through a set of 35 questions and conversation, we sought to discover the way people view their families (who they consider family, who is raising their children, what are their strengths and challenges), the way they feel about their employment, housing, and educational opportunities, and what they see for themselves, their families, and their communities in the near future.

A common set of themes initially emerged, including the rising cost of living (especially housing), which has led to housing insecurity and an increase in multigenerational families living together; a challenging educational landscape, with concerns focused on the quality of the district schools but also disadvantages of the Voluntary Transfer Program (also known as Tinsley); and a general sense that the community is changing and residents are not benefitting from the opportunities offered by Silicon Valley’s technology companies.
COST OF LIVING

The cost of housing appears to be a nearly universal concern among interviewees, with multiple examples of families sharing a home with extended relatives and unrelated housemates. Examples of households surveyed include:

- Eight adults (interviewee’s parents, grandparents, uncle, siblings, daughter, and niece), as well as two children.
- Three adults, three children, and an unrelated family consisting of three adults and two children.
- Two adults and three children, plus a brother-in-law and his son living in the garage.
- Three adults (interviewee, husband, and brother), two children, and an unrelated roommate.

Sample reflections:

“Because things got difficult for us financially, we ended up having to get roommates.”

“I always had a fear of being homeless or not having a place to stay... it had an adverse effect on me as I grew up. I always pay my rent on time. I pay my rent first and if I got to be broke afterwards, I don’t have a problem with it.”

“Actually I’m roommating with someone.” [“She doesn’t like where she’s staying because there’s no resources to help people when you’re in a homeless situation. There’s no resources, so she’s forced to share a room with someone that she doesn’t agree with staying but she have to.”]

“I’m really hoping that if these tech companies are going to be around that they make sure that the people here are still okay. Now they’re not. They’re actually kicking a lot of people out. They might realize it, they might not. They want their employees to work [live] closer to their jobs, but that means that now the rents have gone up, people can’t afford to stay here.”

“Now living in an area that’s so expensive, people are living paycheck to paycheck.”

EDUCATION

High-quality educational opportunities for families in the community is a top priority. We heard concerns about the quality of schools in the Ravenswood District, and the benefits and disadvantages of the Voluntary Transfer Program and charters. The respondents that spoke of Beechwood and Eastside were highly satisfied.
Sample reflections:

“I have two sons with disabilities and I asked over and over again for help.... The only kind of help they could give my boys is fifteen minute a week because they wasn’t retarded....They didn’t get the kind of help that they needed and now my sons are both products of the penitentiary.”

“...I also would like for her to be in a school where she’s actually going to learn, like not going to be wasting her time at school. Where I went to school [EPA], it was pretty much a lot of the students that I know didn’t take it serious. It’s not just the students, the teachers as well.”

“One of my kids go to El Carmelo which is an elementary school in Palo Alto. The other goes to JLS which is a middle school in Palo Alto...field trips, they have opportunities. They have coding classes, they have a pool in the middle school...I’m sure you might have heard that there is an achievement gap in Palo Alto which is real among the Latino and the Black students against the White and the Asian students. That is real, that does exist... The ideal situation would be my kids to go to school in the community where they live. I would love that. I don’t like driving all the way to Palo Alto every day to drop my kids off to school and come back. And friendship-wise... I would love to have good schools in the community where we live.”

“I used to work for Ravenswood City School District. I worked in Special Ed. I saw first hand how students were not identified early if they had any special needs. What happened, was they would go to middle school. They would go to high school. Then, after high school when they’re trying to go to college, they realize that all of a sudden that we never got the help that we needed from Elementary to make us be able to be successful. I worked with a lot of teachers, because I was the secretary for Special Ed and I just saw that the bigger the school, the bigger the cracks. I just knew that I can’t afford for my child to be one of those students that got caught in a crack. It’s like, we’re in tenth grade now and we realize that, Hell, you only can read fourth grade level.”

“I was in the Tinsley Program..... I kind of was like, ‘I want to give this school [EPACS] a try.’ Something about it being so close to home and being in our community where we live...I haven’t regretted it so far... I didn’t really want her to go to the Costaño or any of the nearby schools...”

“I know that you’re in trouble without education, because I myself got out of school when I was 16...With my children, I found that sometimes some of the other districts they provided better education for them.”
“Right now what I’m focusing on is my youngest, my oldest went to college. She graduated from high school, none of my sons graduated from high school.”

CHANGING COMMUNITY

Participants spoke about the changes in the community, with many reflecting on the violence that used to characterize the community (when they were growing up) but also the sense of closeness neighbors felt. Many also highlighted the factors that have led to the rising cost of living and their sense that they would be forced out.

Sample reflections:

“First it was the gunshots. Now, what concerns me is that it’s changed so much. It’s actually like we’re losing our community...Investors are buying houses. People are moving in that aren’t really part of this community.”

“...that everything is going to be more expensive since there’s many people and that the rent might raise up many people are leaving and then in the next five years there’s probably going to be a lot more offices here.’

“The only thing I wish I had access to is how to get hired over here at this Facebook. I believe they need to hire people in the community.”

“I hope they don’t get rid of all the people in East Palo Alto.”

RESOURCES: WHAT EXISTS, WHAT WOULD BE USEFUL

Participants noted several resources they use, especially Ecumenical Hunger Program and the library. About a third of respondents shared that they use food pantries or CalFresh/SNAP benefits. Several noted that residents would benefit from more support programs.

Sample reflections:

“I would love to see more programs, more stuff so that it can help you be a better parent, help kids learn better.”

“There should be more for kids to do. There’s no other stuff for kids to do, only just the Boys and Girls Club.”

“More programs, yeah, more libraries, pretty much programs, after-school programs or daycare programs.”
FINAL REFLECTIONS AND THOUGHTS

There were other sentiments and comments that made an impression on us which we thought were important to note:

• Families are desperate to make more money. They’re willing to work really hard, and hold multiple jobs - they just need the opportunity.
• Because many people in East Palo Alto and Belle Haven take on more physically intensive jobs, we heard many stories of someone in the family not being able to work because of a workplace injury; this added to the stress of the family and/or forced them into uncomfortable situations like living with other roommates or couch surfing.
• A few residents we connected with were homeless and utilized the library for resources.
• Families want access to things across their community like sidewalks, trash cans and more parks which are all plentiful in neighboring Palo Alto - all ideas that would boost their dignity.
• Some families talked about wanting more of a police presence on the streets, and others talked about wanting the police department to mirror what the community looks like.

Generally, although reluctant to participate at first, as the interviews went on, families were more open and candid. When the interviews finished, we received comments from many that they appreciated the time we took to listen. We were heartened by their courage, tenacity, hope, and deep care for one another.

CALL TO ACTION

Times are tough for most families residing in East Palo Alto and Belle Haven. Since we conducted interviews and focus groups, the fear of deportation has also sunk in for many families. There’s a part that each of us can play in support of community residents.

Call to Action:

1. Connect with each other, as humans. Whether you’re a non-profit leader, a funder, a community member, step outside of your space and get out and meet each other. We cannot only be about community through work; in fact, real change happens through the personal connections we may make through work that carry over outside of work. Connect with each other not just through work, but as people living in the Bay Area.
2. Determine and be clear about your response and what will change. As a result of hearing directly from community voices, what will change about you, your organization, or your situation? How has your perspective changed? What program shifts are you considering? What resources will you take advantage of? How will your voice be heard?
3. For residents: Meet your neighbors. Chances are they want to meet you too. When/if you can, go to City Council and School
Board meetings and let your voices be heard. Maybe go with your neighbor.

4. For schools and non-profits: Connect regularly with students and families you are serving. If we’re not listening intently to the folks we’re hoping to serve, we may miss the point entirely. Use different methods to gather input and feedback, and loop back with ideas or changes made or implemented as a result.

5. For funders: Although the community is being hit hard by gentrification, there are still thousands of families residing in the community that rely on key community partners for support. As some funders are slowing down their funding in East Palo Alto or moving away completely, we encourage you to double down. Continue to invest in organizations that are supporting families. Consider being bolder by giving more, funding issues outside of your comfort zone, and supporting basic needs. Use your influence in the right way. Get to know the community you’re making grants in. Not just the leaders, but particularly residents. You will likely gain a new perspective.

6. For everyone: Take what you’ve seen and heard here and think about what impact you can make given your life circumstances and skill set. Think about joining a non-profit board, running in a local election, and/or donating time and money to local organizations.

IMMEDIATE IMPACT WITHIN THE PEEY FOUNDATION

Since embarking on this project, the Peery Foundation has been humbled by the stories shared by residents. We’ve made some changes to our strategy:

1. We were funding education in the community; Now we’re also funding basic need organizations.
2. Providing grants to support mental health services to folks working in the community
3. Researching ways to increase economic opportunities for residents
4. Providing targeted grants to existing grantees to support student and family needs as they are identified

We have so much more to learn, and a lot of hard work ahead of us. We hope to continue to learn directly from residents of East Palo Alto and eastern Menlo Park.

To see the film, visit: www.peeryfoundation.org/familiesproject

To learn more about the Peery Foundation, visit: www.peeryfoundation.org