

BRIDGES COLLABORATIVE MEMBER PROFILE

Inclusive Communities Project



Organization Type: Fair Housing Organization

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| | <p>Geographic Location: North Texas Texas; Dallas County and the surrounding counties of Collin, Denton, Tarrant, Rockwall, Ellis, and Kaufman</p> |
| | <p>Population Families qualifying for a housing choice voucher. Voucher holders are predominantly Black, Latinx, women, and single heads of household.</p> |
| <p>Size</p> <p> 5 Staff 5,000 families assisted by the Mobile Assistance Program since 2005.</p> | <p>Year Founded</p> <p> Founded as the Walker Project in 1990. Rebranded as the Inclusive Communities Project (ICP) in 2004. Expanded reach in response to COVID-19 pandemic needs in 2020.</p> |



How Does the Inclusive Communities Project Work Toward Desegregation?

History of the Inclusive Communities Project

The Walker Project, the predecessor of the Inclusive Communities Project (ICP), was established in 1990 in connection with the [Walker v. HUD Dallas Public Housing Desegregation](#) court case, in which the courts determined that in the Dallas area, the Dallas Housing Authority (DHA), the City of Dallas, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) were responsible for perpetuating the segregation of Black residents with low socioeconomic status. The case resulted in several outcomes, including funding for a new fair housing organization that became the Walker Project. In 2005, the Walker Project was transformed into ICP under new leadership that sought to expand its mission and activities to support desegregation in DHA neighborhoods. Today, ICP has affordable housing resources and aid opportunities, a housing mobility program that helps families with housing vouchers to relocate, and a mission focused on advocacy to change the landscape of racial and economic segregation in North Texas. A housing voucher, also called a housing choice voucher, is a federally-funded subsidy used for financial assistance in obtaining housing. However, landlords may discriminate against voucher-holders, making it harder to access affordable housing. To prevent

landlord discrimination, many communities across the country implemented Source of Income Anti-Discrimination laws so that renters could access housing regardless of their income source.

In Texas, there is no source-of-income protection policy for renters, and some policies facilitate housing discrimination. [Senate Bill 267](#) prevents cities or counties from introducing source-of-income protection policies. Accordingly, cities in Texas cannot prevent landlords from refusing to rent to tenants who have housing vouchers. In their role, ICP advocates for families and landlords to partner to make progress on housing discrimination and to influence broader policy changes in the state that make housing accessible through vouchers. ICP's advocacy mission is focused on increasing affordable housing in the state of Texas, including addressing source-of-income policies and practices which create housing access barriers for families who receive state or federal subsidies.

A Fair Housing Nonprofit in North Texas

ICP is a fair housing nonprofit organization whose goal is to desegregate communities through neighborhood desegregation and school desegregation. Ann Lott, the organization's executive director, explains that people have opportunities to thrive when they have access to good schools, affordable housing, safe neighborhoods, and economic opportunity. The organization helps families get closer to this ideal through (a) its Mobility Assistance Program, which assists housing voucher holders in finding or relocating to homes in high-opportunity areas; (b) online resources such as a database for low-income tax credit (LITC) housing openings and a repository of Texas-based and national fair housing and civil rights resources; (c) advocacy and discrimination defense resources; and (d) resources that support basic human needs such as hunger, clothing, and homelessness.



Spotlight on communication

Communicating Resource Availability to a Population of Focus

ICP communicates their available resources through a tiered approach that includes listing public resources on their website as well as case management and counseling for navigating housing resources and options. These examples highlight ICP's efforts to publicize their available resources in ways that reach *community members who may need them*. In the years since the COVID-19 pandemic changed much of how American and global societies operate, ICP increased the scope for their community of focus. Per their mission, ICP supports housing voucher holders within the context of the waiting list for voucher receipt being long and the demand for vouchers being always high. During the pandemic, the area that ICP serves saw a greater need for affordable housing than ever before and the demand for affordable housing skyrocketed between 2020 and 2022, when pandemic-related layoffs and cost-of-living spikes took an economic and emotional toll on families throughout the United States. Even though much of the country was shut down during this time, ICP staff became conduits for North Texas families to receive local and national resources. As federal and state relief efforts were pushed out in Texas, ICP staff maintained their direct support of individuals and families through phone calls and emails and provided indirect support through their website, which they expanded to accommodate the increase in requests during this time.

ICP administers the Mobility Assistance Program, which is a personalized case management program. As part of this program, ICP staff partner with voucher families to find an appropriate neighborhood in

a high-opportunity area that will meet the needs of the family and match their income restrictions. ICP defines high-opportunity areas as “communities with above average median incomes, low-poverty rates, lower crime rates, and fully resourced public schools,” ([ICP website](#)).

The organization also seeks to serve as an information hub for affordable housing resources by including a [Find a Home database](#) of LIHTC housing hosted on its website. In addition to this searchable tool for affordable housing, ICP maintains a repository of online and call-by-phone resources and information for renters who need financial or legal assistance, are experiencing homelessness, or are searching for employment, food, and other necessities. ICP also collects and posts links to state and national fair housing and civil rights resources and offers an online contact-us form for requesting individualized support or referrals from the organization.

Communicating to Build Awareness and Understanding

The ICP team thinks extensively about how they put their messages into the world to engage diverse populations. This was a key reason for joining the Bridges Collaborative. In describing their communication approach, Shamira Lawrence, mobility outreach director, says, *“Showing the opposition how desegregation will benefit them is one goal. I think moving with the ‘You get more bees with honey’ concept is good. While also maintaining being truth seekers and truth tellers. But doing it in a more intentional way, so that your message is actually received, and it’s not blocked through defensiveness or other things.”*

Strengthening support for affordable housing development is a central component of ICP’s mission, and communication plays an important role. One of the ICP team’s strategies is to track rezoning efforts, housing and zoning hearings, and council decisions and then arrange to speak up for families who will be most affected by the decisions. Notably, housing developers receive tax credits to build some of their housing for low-income families. Still, in Texas it is legal to refuse housing choice vouchers as rent payments. Further, in some communities, residents lobby to exclude voucher-holding families and low-income housing builds from their neighborhoods. These kinds of actions underscore the need to increase awareness and understanding of affordable housing barriers.

They also underscore the need to communicate the positive impact that affordable housing projects can have on communities, schools, and local economies. As a fair housing organization, ICP often struggles to get buy-in in the communities where it wants to relocate its client families. Bridges Collaborative training on messaging has helped the organization shift from talking about equity and fairness—something people were not always receptive to—to talking about the tangible benefits of inclusive communities. By focusing on the positive effects of fair housing laws and projects, rather than their fairness or necessity, ICP has been able to garner more cross-aisle and community support for planned affordable housing communities.

“We had been doing this for years before encountering Bridges Collaborative, but I think [the Bridges Collaborative] was able to elevate our thought process when it came to the messaging, especially because we are in a very adversarial position with what we do and where we are. So being able to bring the message in a softer tone is something that we learned from Bridges that may be more beneficial to our clients.”

—Shamira Lawrence, ICP Mobility Outreach Director

To encourage community buy-in, ICP foregrounds stories from voucher recipients through the Voices for Opportunity program. In their advocacy work promoting fair housing and neighborhood opportunity, ICP staff encounter pushback from residents against allowing affordable housing development in their neighborhoods. The areas that ICP teams target for affordable housing are those that have been historically off-limits to people of color during segregation and remain off-limits to low-income families today. While parent and student clients of ICP have high buy-in and want to move, parents and residents in the target school districts are resistant and sometimes object outright. Many residents in target neighborhoods do not want affordable housing, as they associate it with crime and negative stereotypes. One way that ICP bridges the communication gap between current residents and aspiring residents is by showing up to hearings and council meetings with team members from the Voices for Opportunity initiative. Voices for Opportunity grew out of ICP’s Client Advisory Board, which is a group of past and current clients of ICP’s housing mobility program who volunteer their time to support and advise ICP on priorities, messaging, and problem areas for ICP clients and housing choice voucher holders in general. The goal of the Voices for Opportunity initiative is to counter “not in my backyard” attitudes and actions, which include rezoning neighborhoods to exclude lower-income areas from school districts and exclusionary decision-making in council meetings or homeowner association board meetings. Prohibitive attitudes create access barriers for voucher holders and limit affordable housing development in desirable areas in North Texas. As part of this initiative, alumni of the mobility assistance housing voucher program share stories that reveal who they are and what is possible for them in their new neighborhood with new resources available to them. They share these stories at hearings, council meetings, and community events.

“Encouraging our clients to come forward and share their experiences with the public is often challenging, especially when sharing their stories with the media. That’s because there is stigma among housing choice voucher holders. They prefer to remain anonymous because they want to integrate seamlessly into the community. We try to persuade them that they do not have to be ashamed since most Americans had help realizing the American dream when it comes to housing. Very few pulled themselves up by their bootstraps. The truth is that many opponents of affordable housing in their neighborhoods have benefitted from government assistance themselves. Their grandparents or great-grandparents had access to loan programs that were unavailable to Black families. Part of our role is to share that history.” —Ann Lott, ICP Executive Director

Since the inception of Voices for Opportunity and the public role taken on by some of ICP’s clients, there has been an incremental change in the views of residents. Ms. Lawrence cited one pivotal experience where an alumna of the mobility program shared her story of moving to a high-opportunity area and how it benefited her and her children. The client advisory board member spoke at a council meeting, and people who came to push against affordable housing in their neighborhood were so deeply moved they were brought to tears. This reaction to her story inspired the board member to want to do more advocacy work, for she saw that it could have a major effect. ICP is supportive of their clients and families by offering continuous support before, during and after public sharing if the client chooses to share publicly. Voices for Opportunity can also be contributed to anonymously.

“Participants have the option to share their experiences anonymously if they wish. We respect their privacy and work to create a safe space where individuals feel comfortable expressing their thoughts without fear of retaliation. We also recognize the emotional impact of sharing their stories and therefore ensure that participants know that we are a listening ear for any concerns they may have. Many times, clients just need someone who is willing to listen. In the past we have hosted a healing circle to help clients process some of their feelings based on their experiences. It is our hope to provide this opportunity again in the near future. Overall, our approach is centered on creating a supportive and protective environment for participants, allowing them to share their stories authentically in a safe space.”

—Shamira Lawrence, ICP Mobility Outreach Director

By sharing the lived experiences of the client advisory board, ICP has garnered the assistance of community organizations with small groups in different systems to support specific affordable housing development. In one community, ICP was able to engage a religious congregation and other community members, which resulted in people writing letters of support for fair housing, stating that they do want this housing built in their community, to counter the letters against it. ICP’s shift in their messaging approach has given them more positive stakeholder interactions with groups that are not their clients.



What Factors Support Progress on Communication Across Systems?

Consistent Updates, Information Sharing, and Tailored Messages

One growing area of focus for ICP is how and when they communicate. In particular, the team has been investing in the intentional content and regularity of their messages. ICP has seen that more consistent communication from their team has resulted in greater client engagement and more interest in the Voices for Opportunity program and has created a public track record of their educational, advocacy, and direct client support activities for funders to see. ICP is active on social media and sends regular newsletters to its membership. In the last year, ICP brought in a social media consultant to support their engagement on social platforms. The consultant helped

the organization amplify its voice and shift the narrative to who voucher holders are and what ICP does. The staff also provide project updates through newsletters to families, community members, and other interested parties who have received services from ICP or desire to stay abreast of the organization’s activities. Jennifer Rangel, the organization’s planning and community outreach director shared that ICP uses *“different kinds of newsletters for different purposes, but there’s one about the CAB that we want to focus on. Because we want to show our clients like, ‘Hey, this is what we’re working on. This is something that your peers are working on too. If you’re interested, you could join. This is a support group. We do great stuff. We’re also a community supporting one another.’”* Ms.

Rangel had the idea of dedicating a newsletter to the activity of the client advisory board to recruit additional members, highlight the great work they do, and showcase the Voices for Opportunity initiative. As Ms. Lawrence pointed out, the newsletter serves as a

“One social media campaign that ICP clients have participated in is led by those most impacted by mobility: students. In this campaign, ICP students posted pictures of their new neighborhoods and described opportunities that they have experienced. ICP also has a vision for a future campaign in which their voucher holders describe who they are versus who they are not. The goal of this campaign is to combat stereotypes and myths associated with people who participate in the section 8 program.”

two-way communication tool since ICP clients often reply directly to the newsletter to request additional information about an update or inquire about getting involved in a particular initiative. This allows ICP to collect timely reactions to their initiatives and services.

Both Ms. Rangel and Ms. Lawrence mentioned that their team can get so busy that they forget to share what they are doing. Sharing information is crucial for generating buy-in and also for securing funding. Hiring the social media consultant was the first step in consciously shifting attention and resources toward highlighting the work that ICP does. Ms. Lawrence is optimistic about this investment, saying that *“we’re hoping that we see a bigger impact and more feedback.”* In 2021, ICP launched a comprehensive survey to learn about past clients’ experiences with the services that ICP offers. There is always room for increasing communication between ICP staff and the clients and community they serve, and ICP’s work facilitating two-way communication is just getting started.

“We leverage current landlord relationships, organic outreach, newsletters to inform landlords about the benefits of housing mobility. Our main and most effective message is showing the success stories and emphasizing the positive impact on communities of voucher holders who have moved to high opportunity areas through our mobility efforts.”
—Shamira Lawrence, ICP Mobility Outreach Director

Key Partnerships

Through ICP’s partnership with the DHA, families are directly connected to Mobility Assistance Program staff once they receive a housing voucher. This pipeline of referral from housing authorities like DHA and McKinney Housing Authority to ICP, coupled with ICP’s resources and knowledge about affordable housing throughout the North Texas region, aids families who wish to move to high-opportunity areas. Housing authorities maintain these longstanding informal partnerships with ICP as they understand that clients living in high-opportunity areas have better school and economic outcomes. Because these government organizations do not have client mobility counseling in-house, they refer voucher holders to ICP for assistance in finding housing.

To reach other community organizations that are supportive of the affordable housing movement in Dallas, Ms. Rangel has spoken at these organizations to provide them with information on housing policy and the history of segregation in North Texas. These organizations have expressed interest in working with ICP more in the future and are eager to see how the partnerships will develop over time. To support the success of the Mobility Assistance Program, Ms. Lott and Ms. Lawrence have been and remain connected to landlords and property owners in the region. They describe their relationship with these partners as informal, adaptable, and positive.

“We have written letters, made calls, and spoken in support of landlords that are trying to add affordable units to Walker Targeted or High Opportunity Areas. These partnerships can be an effective way to encourage their participation. In the past we offered incentives to landlords, such as landlord bonus; however, our current budget does support this.

Once a landlord has decided to accept a voucher, we maintain open communication with landlords. We do our best to address any concerns they may have, provide clear information about the mobility process, and ensure they feel supported by offering to step in to help with communication with the housing authority in an effort to alleviate some of the longer waits that may come with the housing authority processes.”

—Shamira Lawrence, ICP Mobility Outreach Director

Staffing

Overall, the team emphasized the importance of knowing who “the face of the work” is and having the right people on the team. The ICP team consists of five staff members. Three are actively public facing and provide dynamic responses to various organizational needs across audiences. *“We have to look at our own skills and make sure we connect well. Make sure our skills are diverse,”* says Ms. Rangel. ICP staff advise similar organizations to get comfortable and push to be in the public eye—not just speak in front of the policy makers and the people who show up at the hearings but put energy into addressing funders, other stakeholders, and the general public.



What Are the Challenges to Making Progress on Communication Across Systems?

Policy Change

In many U.S. states, there is a policy called “source-of-income protection.” This policy bars housing establishments such as apartment complexes and housing management companies from using an applicant’s income source to determine whether to provide them with housing. Without this policy, applicants using housing choice vouchers can be rejected for having unsuitable income. When in place, the protection helps to level the playing field and gives low-income families using housing vouchers more residential options. Because cities in Texas cannot prevent landlords from refusing to accept tenants using housing vouchers, one result is that some residential areas have especially high concentrations of voucher holders and Section 8 public housing units. These tend to be areas that are deemed less desirable by those who can afford to live elsewhere, are nearer to industrial and environmental hazards, and have higher levels of crime and reduced economic opportunity. A main goal of ICP is to dissuade discrimination based on sources of income like housing vouchers. Such discrimination limits people’s options for accessing housing, which is associated with other significant life opportunities. ICP will continue to advocate for source-of-income protection in its region and in the entire state.

Establishing School Partnerships

Ms. Rangel notes that “synergy between school districts and housing mobility programs are necessary if we want these families to live and thrive. Safety is the bare minimum, and getting all the tools that everyone else receives is the goal of desegregating school districts.” The staff supporting the work at ICP know that more goes into the success of students and families than being in a neighborhood with more resources. They see firsthand that integration, sense of belonging, and community acceptance partly determine whether families choose to stay in their new school communities. Ms. Rangel and Ms. Lawrence hope to build capacity at ICP to strengthen communication with schools in their targeted districts and address early challenges to student acclimation and success. ICP staff believe that involvement in the Bridges Collaborative, coupled with learning from other mobility programs with successful school-related support systems, will inform their next steps.

School Partnership Goals

Getting schools on board with the mission of ICP is a current goal of the organization, as it will make their advocacy and direct client support efforts more effective.

“For me, the ideal partnership would be one where the schools are not speaking out against affordable housing. Because in the past we have had that, where the district will come in and say, ‘Oh, this is going to flood our schools so vote against it.’ So, gaining allies of some sort on the side of the children who are coming into the district. And also being able to share information with schools to show them how integration is beneficial. Ideally, we would love to share data so that they can see that the kids that are coming into your school through our program, they're doing well, they're exceeding expectations. You're helping them and they're helping you. Your current students are benefiting from seeing somebody from a different walk of life. You have voucher clients at your school already and you didn't even know it.”

—Shamira Lawrence, ICP Mobility Outreach Director

Some clients encounter negative blowback in schools, including being treated differently because of their association with Section 8 housing status in Texas. Ms. Lawrence believes that schools could become allies in ICP's advocacy activities and support for families. She mentioned that a local affiliate of the [Communities in Schools](#) program, though not currently affiliated with ICP, is helping ICP families through its own efforts, presenting an opportunity for a natural partnership. Ms. Lawrence explains what might help bridge the gap between schools and fair housing organizations like ICP:

“I used to be a teacher and I used to work for the school district in a couple of Collin County schools. So I do know that most teachers want to serve their students and they want to serve them well. They want to serve them in the best way. And teachers having the most information possible in order to do that would make it easier for them and benefit the students wholeheartedly. But the fact is that we don't have that connection because a lot of the pushback comes from school administration. I feel like if we had a connection to the teachers, we might get more buy-in. But so much goes through administration first.”

One approach that Ms. Lawrence has considered is to mount an education campaign tailored for teachers and administrators to debunk common stereotypes and assumptions about voucher holders and Section 8 families and help them understand that “we all have the same goals in mind.”



Lessons Learned

- One of the greatest effects of being an organization that advocates for fair housing and equity is being able to elevate and amplify the voices of the people the organization represents while supporting them. Showing why the work matters on a human, interpersonal, relationship-driven level is the goal.
- Highlighting the work of the organization takes time and resources, but it is worth the investment, as it garners support for future work by showing where funds are going and how new people can get involved.
- Different groups of people perceive and interact with fair housing and equity-based initiatives in different ways. Tailoring outreach materials to each audience will increase investment in and support for the organization's efforts across diverse systems and groups of people.
- It is crucially important to educate potential partners, including teachers and school administrators, on the mission and impact of the housing organization's work in their district in ways that highlight the benefits for building inclusive communities.