

HISTORY/BACKGROUND

Immediately following the influx of evacuees to Georgia from Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, it became apparent that there was a definite need for a service to link those displaced by a disaster with the supply of special needs and affordable rental housing options. Out of that need, a partnership was formed between the Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA) and the United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta. The resulting solution - GeorgiaHousingSearch.org (a comprehensive on-line rental housing listing and locator service) - has evolved to become a lasting effort to provide housing solutions to the community at large, helping to link families to the foundation for prosperity.

In addition to assisting natural disaster victims, most recently the September 2009 floods that impacted thousands of Georgia families, GeorgiaHousingSearch.org (GHS) has also become a key tool in identifying appropriate housing options for Georgia's special needs populations and in facilitating the work of the support service organizations serving these groups.

With the support and guidance of public and private entities, GHS has grown tenfold over the past five years. Over 150,000 units are listed on the website and almost 10,000 searches are completed daily by individuals seeking affordable housing choices.

By pushing the boundaries of what a housing-focused, web-based tool can do for families and communities and by ensuring that the service is marketed and known to all Georgians, GHS has become the go-to resource for housing needs in the state, outperforming similar private search engines in terms of units listed and relevant information provided.

INNOVATIVE

What makes GHS so innovative is its ability to coordinate the many private and public stakeholders involved in affordable and special needs housing. No other system in Georgia offers the same potential to interconnect housing & service providers with their target populations.

This ability is aptly demonstrated through an Advisory Council that was formed to help provide direction and access to resources by leveraging government and private sector housing professionals. The Council is led by David Stockert, CEO & President of Post Properties, Inc. (a company founded more than 38 years ago and now one of the largest developers and operators of upscale multifamily communities in the United States). Mr. Stockert brought his leadership and industry savvy to strategically form and guide a broader implementation, promotion and marketing plan for GHS. The Council is made up of a roster of housing advocates and leaders among the property management sector, private affordable housing developers and related associations, public housing officials, non-profit service providers, and the disability community.

“As a company committed to leadership in residential real estate, Post Properties sees the importance of providing an effective, inexpensive way to deliver housing options to all of Georgia’s citizens. GeorgiaHousingSearch.org provides this much needed service and we will continue to contribute our expertise and resources to realize its full potential.”
David P. Stockert, CEO and President Post Properties

HFA: Georgia Department of Community Affairs/Georgia Housing and Finance Authority
Entry Name: GeorgiaHousingSearch.org

Georgia also capitalized on its existing state-wide Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) implementation to establish a Special Needs Housing Services Tool to a pre-approved, confidentiality trained group of human services providers giving them password protected access to landlords who are willing to promote their properties to special needs populations. This innovative feature, replete with comprehensive search filters, has provided vital housing connections that meet the specific needs for countless citizens who are often the most difficult to serve.

REPLICABLE

GHS is powered by SocialServe.com; a national non-profit provider of housing locator services that created the software and maintains the site and call center support. In its 10th year of operation, SocialServe.com has established contracts in 27 other states. However, the state of Georgia has led the way for other Socialserve.com clients as the national model for supporting, marketing, expanding, and optimally utilizing their own statewide housing locator systems.

“The state of Georgia has actively employed highly effective, targeted marketing for GeorgiaHousingSearch.org, including bus wraps and light rail panels, presentations at local housing conferences, and working with Georgia Emergency Management to streamline access to housing for disaster survivors. Georgia DCA is a national model for promoting their housing locator to meet a broad range of needs.”

Van Goettel, CEO SocialServe.com

REACH TARGETED AUDIENCES

Capitalizing on the tools donated by Post Properties and one of Atlanta’s most prominent public relations firms, Jackson Spalding, Georgia created a logo and tag line for its outreach efforts. These efforts have included on-line marketing to all factions of the affordable housing community, bi-lingual flyer distribution, countless services demonstrations, and a grass roots marketing campaign that included a statewide presence at relevant conferences and trade shows that increased exposure. Vital web links were established with United Way of Metropolitan Atlanta, the Department of Housing & Urban Development (HUD), Georgia Affordable Housing Association, Georgia Department of Labor, Georgia Emergency Management Association, Georgia Department of Human Services and others.

Presentations were facilitated regularly to housing advocacy groups, non-profit coalitions and relevant housing forums. On-going outreach to public housing authorities has resulted in a number of Georgia’s PHAs, including Atlanta, Macon and DeKalb, utilizing GHS exclusively for their Housing Choice program listings. Macon Housing Authority has also taken the additional step of using kiosks in their lobbies to facilitate access to the service by their customers.

DCA mandates that tax credit properties funded by the state of Georgia must register their rental properties on the web site. Financed largely by private donations from United Way and the Atlanta Housing Authority, marketing campaigns which target public transit, online & print publications concurrently in strategic locations throughout the state have resulted in a sharp spike of property registrations and daily searches.

ACHIEVE MEASURABLE RESULTS

GHS performs as a powerful tool in collecting, organizing and analyzing information vital to serving our communities. The data on the system identifies housing supply gaps and trends, measures growth of system and success of marketing campaigns, and helps guide agency housing outreach efforts. The system also achieves results in critical times of need. Facing a sudden surge in one of Atlanta's largest shelters, the Chairman of the Atlanta Regional Commission on Homelessness challenged Project Communities Connect, Inc., a housing services partner, to place these families utilizing GHS. As a result, 186 unduplicated persons, mostly women with children, were placed into apartment communities where support service agencies worked with the mothers to regain stability and achieve self-sufficiency. This is one example demonstrating Georgia's coordinated and responsive approach when creating this tool.

PROVIDE BENEFITS THAT OUTWEIGH COSTS

The internet provides the vehicle to connect all of Georgia and GHS offers the interconnectivity necessary to link families with specific needs to the housing that best fits their requirements. GeorgiaHousingSearch.org operates on a simple, fundamental premise: it is far cheaper, faster and less complicated to fill decent and affordable existing housing units than it is to raise funds and develop new or renovated units. From that perspective, this is a winning proposition for people searching for housing, for landlords, for nonprofit agencies who work with people needing housing, and for government agencies.

DEMONSTRATE EFFECTIVE USE OF RESOURCES

The State currently funds the building and development of affordable rental housing through millions of dollars in equity generated by the Georgia Housing Tax Credit. Our additional average investment of \$160,000 annually provides the ability to market both new and existing affordable units through GHS and maximizes the effect of our tax credit investment.

ACHIEVE STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

CHALLENGE

- ✓ To provide a statewide response to the immediate housing needs of evacuees fleeing the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.
- ✓ To establish and promote a statewide affordable housing locator database that serves landlords, human service providers, and the general public.
- ✓ To remain consistent with the state vision to provide opportunity for decent, affordable, and accessible housing.

RESULTS

- ✓ An accessible, user friendly housing locator website maintaining over 150,000 registered property units and growing every day.
- ✓ A current instrument to enable Georgia to respond effectively and rapidly when disaster strikes.
- ✓ A tool that enables service providers to match housing choices for the most-difficult to house, whether caused by poor credit, criminal background, homelessness, or disability.