

'Be the Change' -- Doing Good for Others While Meeting Strategic Objectives Management Innovation: Human Resources

Overview

In a time when more and more people are talking about the economy in terms of billions and yes, trillions of dollars, can \$3 make a difference in the lives of others? At Rhode Island Housing, the answer is 'yes.'

Our 'Be the Change' initiative is a simple approach to doing good for others while meeting strategic objectives. Taken from the Gandhi quote: "We must be the change we wish to see in the world," the program's title also plays off of the idea of donating small monetary 'change' collectively to achieve greatest impact. This agency-wide initiative goes beyond what we do programmatically to fulfill our mission. At its very core, it's about keeping things simple and valuing a spirit of philanthropy while meeting strategic objectives.

In a state like Rhode Island, with the highest percentage of subprime loans, 2nd highest unemployment rate in the nation, 19th in foreclosures, our state and its residents are hurting. Rhode Island Housing has always believed that our mission goes beyond finding people a home. A home to us is much more than four walls and a roof – it is the people within and the community around. The question of how can we do more to help those in need, especially as the need increases with each passing day, has been answered with our multi-faceted 'Be the Change' program.

Meeting Strategic Objectives

Rhode Island Housing itself also benefits from this initiative as it helps meet our Human Resources strategic objectives. With little funding available for HR activities and initiatives, the program has already resulted in a happier and more engaged staff, with improved staff participation than previous HR initiatives. The program meets HR goals by bolstering employee morale and fostering team work, all while helping those in the communities we serve. We have found that the majority of our staff work at Rhode Island Housing because they truly believe in our mission. While they receive professional job satisfaction working here, we find that many are looking for personal satisfaction as well. Staff participation illustrates our staff's sense of strong public purpose and hope for a better tomorrow. No other program has brought together so many staff from all divisions of the agency to work together.

The program complements the work that we do while helping us in retaining qualified and committed staff, developing a fun and rewarding work place, expanding our internal culture and engaging our employees. 'Be the Change' activities help to bring our staff together, breaking down 'walls' between divisions, getting people together who share common goals and interests. The program connects all staff, whether they work in Development, Homeownership, Policy, HR, IT, Finance, Administration, etc to our mission in a personal and meaningful way.

Staff have reported that these activities help them feel good about themselves and proud of the role Rhode Island Housing plays throughout the state. A happier staff has resulted in improved employee retention, improved work performance and has helped with employee recruitment as community members and partner organizations are aware of our efforts as a change agent. By offering our time, energy, talent and passion to those in need, in the communities we serve, we support our mission while also reinforcing that Rhode Island Housing is a great place to work, with caring, compassionate and engaged staff. The public's awareness of our philanthropic efforts has also helped in strengthening our relationships with non-profits, community-based agencies, and others while also providing us with a platform to continue our outreach and fulfill our mission.

The Program

Administered in-house by our Human Resources staff, the program has been embraced agency-wide as a way to give back to the communities we serve. Started as a simple idea: allowing all staff to wear jeans on Fridays for a

contribution to a charitable cause, it has flourished into a feel-good effort that has had a significant impact on the lives of others while allowing for professional and personal growth of our staff.

The program works by embracing the sentiment that it is the simple things that change lives. With a lean budget, a small HR staff, and the need to ensure that our scarce resources go to funding affordable housing, the 'Be the Change' initiative is an effective use of our resources, producing a very big impact as it utilizes existing resources – our HR staff –, requires minimal if any cost to the agency, is replicable by other HFAs, takes a simple approach to ameliorating complex social issues, and is innovative in its simplicity and straightforward approach.

Details:

All staff are given the opportunity to wear jeans on Fridays for a donation of \$3 each (\$2 more if staff wish to also wear sneakers). Many staff contribute to the effort even though they choose not to wear jeans to work. Many also contribute more than the \$3 as they see the dramatic difference our fundraising can make to worthwhile organizations throughout the state. Individually, \$3 may not make an impact, but the program illustrates our belief that 'all great things are only a number of small things that have carefully been collected together.'

Charities are geographically located throughout the state and represent many types of need: shelter, food banks/soup kitchens, clothing drives, support for medical treatment and research.

Staff are able to suggest appropriate charitable groups, representing those agencies and causes that are near and dear to them. The agency's embrace of initiatives that are important to staff illustrates Rhode Island Housing's commitment to both the residents of the state and our employees and their interests. Staff have a vested interest in the program as they have helped to shape and define it. Additionally, Rhode Island Housing's embrace of staff's interests and values helps create a shared vision for how we can help others.

HR staff send out weekly email notices informing staff of the Jeans Day charity, including additional information on the agency/program/initiative and links to their website(s), etc. The notices are also posted throughout the agency, as well as any follow-up information relating to the impact of our efforts. For those opportunities that also include a volunteer activity, HR staff coordinates staff participation, follows up with photographs of staff participating on our employee intranet, and ensures recognition of participants by other staff, senior leadership and our Board. The creation of volunteer 'teams' has helped foster an appreciation of team work that extends into other arenas of our work.

Signage in our main lobby informs visitors of our Jeans Day policy; why staff are dressed casually and the difference it is making throughout the state. Visitors to our offices see that Rhode Island Housing staff are committed to positive change and know that we are here to help.

The program has been re-vamped and expanded to include volunteer activities connected to the Jeans Days fundraising, as well as related food drives, clothing collections, school supplies and other items as part of the "Be the Change" initiative. Jeans Days is but one component of the initiative—and serves as the launching pad for our participation in:

- Volunteer activities: HR coordinates regular volunteer activities, which correspond to our Jeans Day drives. For instance, we regularly participate in volunteer programs such as Rebuilding Together and Habitat for Humanity with teams of staff working together at job sites and throughout the community. Our Jeans Days fundraising adds to our efforts by raising critically-needed dollars for these organizations in addition to our volunteer hours.
- Participation in bike-a-thons, walk-a-thons: We annually hold Jeans Days fundraisers for both the MS 150 ride and the Breast Cancer Walk. The money we collect through Jeans Days

complements staff participation in such activities as walk-a-thons and bike-a-thons in support of MS and cancer research. Photographs of our volunteer teams, media coverage, and updates on participation and its impact are distributed to all staff, creating a sense of pride and accomplishment in our efforts and their impact.

- Charitable Giving Campaign, raising over \$30,000 annually for the Fund for Community Progress and United Way agencies. These agencies are also represented in our Jeans Day fundraising activities throughout the year, receiving financial support from our staff through Jeans Days collections and our annual giving campaign. HR staff tracks each division's charitable contributions throughout the drive, recognizing the contributions while creating a fun and engaging 'competition' among staff;
- Santa's Helpers Committee, comprised of volunteer staff supported by senior management and HR, which coordinates fundraising activities in support of families in our FSS (Family Self-Sufficiency) program (raising money each year through staff-coordinated special events and activities such as pizza parties, bake sales, ice cream socials, etc) to raise funds so that each family in the program receives a gift or gift card at the holidays.

The Results

Since the program's inception in 2007, we have raised over \$110,000 through this effort. Approximately \$13,000 is raised each year through our weekly Jeans Days program alone; \$78,341 through our Charitable Giving campaign; \$4,000 annually for our Santa's Helpers program; and \$4,000 in donated goods. This total does not include our volunteer hours.

Through recognition and awareness efforts of our HR division, staff see the value of the small 'change' to support organizations and charitable groups from largest to smallest throughout the state. While we may all experience increased pressures and requests from worthwhile organizations in our daily lives, staff find this program to be valuable in that it increases the impact of their contributions through coordination of our efforts. With pressures on all of us as we face uncertain financial futures, our staff have stepped up to the plate to enthusiastically support the program. Even as times have gotten tougher and budgets tighter, our staff's participation and enthusiasm has increased rather than decreased.

'Be the Change' is a simple program -- no bells, no whistles. But it offers staff a meaningful way to support local causes, one penny, one dollar at a time while achieving our strategic objectives.

Why it is meritorious:

Innovative: program's simplicity and straightforward approach to helping others while achieving strategic objectives.

Replicable: program can easily be adapted and implemented by other states.

Respond to a management challenge or opportunity: retention and recruitment of qualified and committed staff who actively support our mission is critical to this HFA's success.

Achieve measurable improvements in agency operations: we have witnessed improved work performance across all divisions based upon improved morale, strengthened relationships among staff and team building efforts.

Provide benefits that outweigh costs: besides a small amount for recognition activities, the program actually creates funding for worthwhile organizations and initiatives; offering support to our many partner agencies and the people they serve.

Demonstrate effective use of resources: our HR staff are able to facilitate volunteer and fundraising activities and individuals within each division have proactively taken on the role of team leaders for various efforts; the program utilizes staff time and talent and requires little to no funding.

Achieve strategic objectives: has increased staff morale and participation, built and strengthened our partnerships with social service and housing agencies, heightened awareness of our role in communities and the people we serve.