

2014 Entry Form
(Complete one for each entry.)

Fill out the entry name *exactly* as you want it listed in the program.

Entry Name _____

HFA _____

Submission Contact _____

Phone _____ **Email** _____

Qualified Entries must be received by **Tuesday, July 1, 2014**.

For more information about Qualified Entries, [click here to access the 2014 Entry Rules](#).

Use this header on the upper right corner of each page.

HFA _____

Entry Name _____

Communications	Homeownership	Rental Housing	Special Needs Housing
<input type="checkbox"/> Annual Report <input type="checkbox"/> Promotional Materials and Newsletters <input type="checkbox"/> Creative Media	<input type="checkbox"/> Empowering New Buyers <input type="checkbox"/> Home Improvement and Rehabilitation <input type="checkbox"/> Encouraging New Production	<input type="checkbox"/> Multifamily Management <input type="checkbox"/> Preservation and Rehabilitation <input type="checkbox"/> Encouraging New Production	<input type="checkbox"/> Combating Homelessness <input type="checkbox"/> Housing for Persons with Special Needs
Legislative Advocacy	Management Innovation	Special Achievement	Are you providing visual aids?
<input type="checkbox"/> State Advocacy <input type="checkbox"/> Federal Advocacy	<input type="checkbox"/> Financial <input type="checkbox"/> Human Resources <input type="checkbox"/> Operations <input type="checkbox"/> Technology	<input type="checkbox"/> Special Achievement	<input type="checkbox"/> YES <input type="checkbox"/> NO

Management Innovation – Technology

The Road Home

Why Does Homebuyer Counseling Matter?

It has been a long held belief of MassHousing and many others in the affordable housing sector that low-income, first-time homebuyers benefit significantly from pre-purchase homebuyer counseling. The Agency believes that well informed homebuyers are better prepared for the responsibilities of homeownership after participating in a formally structured homebuyer education program. For a number of years MassHousing has required that all first-time homebuyers take a rigorous homeownership course sanctioned by a state agency in Massachusetts, Citizen's Housing and Planning Agency (CHAPA), and delivered by approved counseling agencies across Massachusetts.

What was the Challenge?

The requirement brought with it several challenges. Scheduled classes, consisting of two or three sessions running up to 12 hours in total, often conflicted with a homebuyer's work and/or personal schedule. In some instances, closings on home purchases were even scheduled prior to a homebuyer's ability to register for and complete a course. As such, these challenges often drove lenders to alternative mortgage products that did not require homebuyer education resulting in either higher mortgage costs or inappropriate – and potentially riskier mortgage products for the homebuyer/borrowers. In some instances the alternative mortgages were actually Alt-A or subprime products. In other instances they were higher cost FHA mortgages.

What was the Solution?

In an effort to deal with today's realities, work schedules, changing lifestyles, and emerging technologies, MassHousing developed a proprietary online homebuyer education program entitled *The Road Home*. This online program incorporated content approved by CHAPA. The technology used, over a four year period, evolved from a simple PowerPoint presentation created in Webex Presentation Studio, and housed on the MassHousing website (eMassHousing.com) to a sophisticated online program developed with the use of *Articulate Storyline*, with the assistance of online education resource consultant, Illumina. It is now housed in the cloud at articulate.com.

At its initiation, the program had nominal acceptance, being used by a few non-profit counseling agencies coping with classroom courses that were oversubscribed. Unfortunately, at the time it was seen by some homebuyer counseling agencies as a lesser quality alternative in some cases and in others as an actual threat to the preferred face-to-face homebuyer education programs. With their fee income, these programs were an essential financial lifeblood for these organizations.

Over a three year period, MassHousing continuously updated and made both content and technological enhancements to *The Road Home*, which allowed CHAPA to include it in a test pilot program of homebuyer counseling programs that included Housing Partnership Network's *Framework™* and Neighborworks' *eHomeAmerica™*.

What Set MassHousing's Program Apart?

MassHousing's online education differentiated itself from the national programs in several important ways. The first is that it is not a one-size-fits-all approach. It allows the program, which mirrors the content and quality of the national programs, to include business and legal terms that are specific to Massachusetts. It also allows the inclusion of art, graphics and even language within the narration that is reflective of the Massachusetts market in particular. The second is that MassHousing's development and ownership of the program allows the Agency to offer this product through counseling agencies at no cost to them! This is a huge boost to the agencies' efforts to encourage this product's use.

Added Benefits

MassHousing is prevented by its charter from making direct financial contributions to non-profit counseling agencies. However, passing on the program at no cost to these agencies allows them to reoffer the program at a reduced cost to the consumer, while still earning meaningful income for themselves as the sponsors of the program. The program gives total control and access to each counseling agency that can make its own determination as to whether online education is appropriate for each individual borrower circumstance. Testing built into the course, and brief face-to-face meetings with homebuyers (occasionally using Skype) also allows the counseling agencies to validate the completion of the course by the homebuyers involved.

The counseling agencies register borrowers with MassHousing and use a MassHousing generated ID and password for their individual borrowers. Once they log in, borrowers can log out and return at their convenience, completing the course on a timetable that meets their personal schedule. Reports can be generated to track borrower progress as they move through the course. Test results can be monitored allowing counselors to spend time with borrowers on topics where they may not appear to have a good grasp of the material. The periodic testing does not allow a borrower to move to the next section until they have received a passing grade on the section they have just completed. Upon successful completion, the authority to certify that the borrower has successfully completed the course rests with the counseling agency which can use whatever methods they feel necessary to prevent cheating.

The CHAPA test pilot of the various online homebuyer education programs was recently completed and MassHousing's *The Road Home* was a near unanimous choice over other online homebuyer education options, among those agencies participating in the pilot. It has also been

nominated for the 2014 International E-Learning Awards (IELA) in the Business and Industry Division.

The Numbers Tell the Story of the Program's Success

In 2011 the first year *The Road Home* was offered, four counseling agencies used the program and approximately 200 borrowers complete the program, allowing the participating counseling agencies to earn approximately \$18,000 in fee income. *The Road Home* was launched on Articulate On-Line in a Storyline format in March of 2013. That version was created by MassHousing and used through November 2013 at which time MassHousing launched the single version of *The Road Home* that was improved by Illumina, an online education consultant. The total number of users who completed the course from March 2013 through October 2013 was 1,630. During the eight month period November 2013 through June 1, 2014 an additional 1,234 homebuyers have completed the course for a total of 2,864! The numbers tell the story of this online counseling program's success.

Research shows that immigrant families are adopting technology such as the Internet, tablet computers and smart phones at rates equal to and often higher than non-minorities who are more comfortable with older technology. To take advantage of this cultural reality, a Spanish language version of *The Road Home (Camino a Casa)* will be launched in July, followed by Portuguese (*O Caminho a Casa*) in October. Additional languages can also be added based on need and state population demographics. The approximate cost to translate *The Road Home* is approximately \$50,000 per language.

Another important part of this effort is illustrated by the total revenue generated by participating counseling agencies during the past 14 months in utilizing this program. It currently totals over \$250,000. This is a tremendous financial boost to the local counseling agencies that in turn can use these funds to support their operations.

Most importantly, 2,864 homebuyers have received counseling during the past year to become better prepared and better qualified homebuyers – and MassHousing believes the value of that outcome is priceless.

Conclusion

MassHousing's efforts with this program are in part – an illustration of the age-old motto – “If at first you don't succeed – try, try again.” MassHousing – like all HFAs – knows well the value of homebuyer counseling. But the value of an idea does not guarantee its successful implementation. MassHousing's efforts to create a successful and well utilized online homebuyer counseling program prove that Agencies must always listen to the needs of the customers – as well as the concerns of their business partners. By considering both of these angles – MassHousing found its recipe for success.