

Management Innovation: Human Resources **MassHousing – Family First: Balancing Work and Life**

Housing finance agencies (“HFAs”) compete for talent every day – talent that an HFA seeks to attract and recruit, and, once hired, talent that the HFA works hard to develop and most importantly – to retain.

The typical HFA cannot offer salaries and perquisites that one sees in the private sector. There are no stock options; bonuses are modest to non-existent; and career ladders are often limited. What HFAs do share is a common mission – a worthwhile public purpose that its employees value and take pride in – and that plays a role in attracting job applicants who have a desire to do important and meaningful work that truly makes a difference in the lives of others. Nevertheless, MassHousing believes it is important to recognize that the Agency’s employees cannot sustain their lives on goodwill alone. An area where MassHousing believes it does offer competitive advantages – is with the concept of “Balancing Work and Life”.

Many of our employees tell us that they made a conscious choice to work at our agency rather than pursue a career elsewhere in the housing industry. Some say that they wanted out of the “rat race,” or that a comparable position in the private sector required too many late nights or frequent out-of-state travel. By and large, our employees are looking for meaningful work, which they hope will be recognized and rewarded. These rewards can take many forms, but chief among them are policies and benefits that make it easier for these employees to balance the demands of their work life with their home life.

MassHousing has created a work environment that supports its employees – as individuals, as spouses, as parents, as children, as members of traditional and non-traditional families, and as members of the larger community. Some of what the Agency can offer is simply understanding, a certain amount of flexibility, and the most valuable commodity of them all: time. At the same time, MassHousing provides services and benefits that put MassHousing in the top tier of **family-friendly** employers.

Parental Leave

MassHousing is committed to playing an active role in creating a culture of shared family responsibilities for all of its employees. The primary objective of the Parental Leave benefit is to enable parents (both women and men) to have an opportunity to spend time with and care for a young child. With the birth, adoption or foster placement of a child, MassHousing offers a 4-week, paid **Parental Leave** benefit that can be used to supplement paid time off available to the employee. This paid time off can include a combination of vacation, sick, and personal leave and is in ***addition*** to whatever benefits are paid as a claim on our employer-paid disability insurance policy. It is important to note that Parental Leave is available to mother or father, and can be used at the time of the birth, adoption or foster placement, or on an intermittent basis during the first year following birth, adoption or foster placement.

The genesis of this policy was an analysis by MassHousing’s Human Resources Department of the experience of a parent with a “typical” birth and a standard 12-week maternity leave. What the Agency learned was that many new parents had difficulty saving sufficient sick and vacation time prior to the birth or adoption of their child to remain at their full salary while on leave.

For a “normal birth,” the disability insurance benefit only provided coverage for the first six weeks following the birth. Most frustrating for employees was the fact that with a 30-day elimination period, this benefit was negligible. MassHousing’s existing disability insurance benefit provides an employee with 60% of their earnings while they are covered.

MassHousing's parental leave benefit was designed effectively to eliminate this exclusion period, enabling the new mother to use her earned leave to supplement the limited disability income for weeks 5 through 12.

When this policy was developed, there was an active decision to include fathers in the benefit – acknowledging how important it is for the new fathers to be available to their families at this important time in their lives. While there is no prohibition for a new father to use the benefit over four consecutive weeks, we find that many of them enjoy the flexibility of using this benefit throughout the baby's first year. Feedback from MassHousing employees indicates that many will use two weeks when their child is first born or adopted and then they may use the remaining 10 days to support their spouse as needed throughout the year.

MassHousing believes that this benefit has helped to recruit and to retain employees who are starting families, and is one of many signs to them that MassHousing supports both its employees and as well as their families.

Lactation Room

As part of a recent renovation of MassHousing's office space (which was funded by the landlord in conjunction with the restructuring of our lease through 2015), MassHousing can now offer our returning birth mothers a comfortable and private **Lactation Room**.

This extraordinary benefit has been very well received – and has proven very important to our new mothers. The Lactation Room's design was carefully researched. The goal is to provide nursing mothers with a safe, sanitary, comfortable and convenient place to pump and store their breast milk. For privacy, the room is accessed with a security card reader, and access is managed by MassHousing's Human Resources Department as an extension of the Agency's benefits program. The room is outfitted with comfortable chairs, footstools, side tables and storage cabinets for the equipment when in and not in use and a refrigerator for storing the milk until the end of the day.

Without this kind of facility, many of our returning mothers had few options other than the restroom or perhaps a private office if one was available. Most experts agree, however, that the environment needs to be conducive to this activity for it to be effective – meaning mothers must be relaxed and comfortable. As such, the lighting in this room is a bit dimmer than the typical office fluorescent lighting – and the door lock provides the security of knowing that a mother will not be interrupted. Prior to creating the Lactation Room, some of MassHousing's new mothers have told us that they had reluctantly shifted to baby formula given the inconveniences and indignities arising from their failed attempts to pump at work.

Back-Up Day Care

All working parents require child-care services when a parent or other family member cannot provide the care. These services – whether from a private child care provider or in a day care center – are vital to many working parents. As such, when an employee's regular child-care provider is ill or on vacation – this usually means one of the parents must stay home from work to look after the child.

MassHousing's **Back-Up Day Care** is a terrific alternative for parents faced with this situation. In such a situation, MassHousing parents can arrange to bring their child to an emergency **Back-Up Day Care Center** which is located within two blocks of MassHousing's office in downtown Boston. The center also provides a much needed and very popular school vacation program, enabling the parent of a young child to continue to come to work rather than using their accrued time during these periods. The back-up facility is very popular among the program's participants – because it is a beautiful center that is well run, inviting and close to our office. MassHousing pays for a membership in the center, and employees who utilize the program are charged only a modest daily usage fee, which is handled as a payroll deduction. The benefits of this program are obvious: reduced absenteeism caused by such occurrences, and it – like the other benefits mentioned here – are highly regarded by participants and non-participants alike.

Flexible Working Hours

This policy is designed to allow employees greater flexibility in their hours of work by allowing Department Heads to vary regular work hours to accommodate employee preferences in work schedules. Department Heads are allowed to consider their specific staffing needs – but where reasonable and appropriate, they are encouraged to make flextime benefits available to their employees. The flexible work hours within which an employee can propose to schedule work are between 7:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m. In addition, MassHousing is open to considering part-time status for its valued employees. Currently, about 7% of MassHousing's work force takes advantage of this opportunity.

MassHousing has found that this is a very important benefit for its employees. It is one that they value tremendously – and again – it is one that sets the Agency apart in terms of employee benefits. While providing a benefit to the employee – there are many reasons this makes sense for the Agency – in terms of longer “coverage” for certain key customer service departments in the agency – and also in terms of keeping employees off the road at “peak” times for traffic and public transit use. In all, MassHousing estimates now that more than half of its employees maintain “non-traditional” work hours.

Conclusion

On July 12, 2007 an article was featured in the *Washington Post* with the headline, *Part-Time looks Fine to Working Moms* and went on to report that, “60% of employed mothers find part-time work most appealing.” What this shows is that employees can find fulfillment in jobs that are not necessarily part of the straight 9-5 mode. MassHousing has not only capitalized on this but also has taken it one step further in creating an Agency with a family-friendly work environment that supports its employees and values their needs outside of the office. On June 30, 2008, MassHousing closed one of its biggest lending years in the Agency's 42-year history. It doesn't seem to be a cliché to say, “Happy employees are productive employees.”