

NCSHA 2015 Annual Awards Entry Form

(Complete one form for each entry)

Deadline: Wednesday, June 10, 2015

Visit ncsha.org/awards to view the Annual Awards Call for Entries.

Instructions: Type entry information into the form and save it as a PDF. Do not write on or scan the form. If you have any questions contact Matt Cunningham at mcunningham@ncsha.org or 202-624-5424.

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

Entry Name: _____

HFA: _____

Submission Contact: (Must be HFA Staff Member) _____ **Email:** _____

Please provide a 15-word (maximum) description of your nomination to appear on the NCSHA website.

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

HFA: _____

Entry Name: _____

Select the appropriate subcategory of your entry and indicate if you are providing visual aids.

Communications	Homeownership	Legislative Advocacy	Management Innovation
Annual Report	Empowering New Buyers	Federal Advocacy	Financial
Creative Media	Encouraging New Production	State Advocacy	Human Resources
Promotional Materials and Newsletters	Home Improvement and Rehabilitation		Operations
			Technology
Rental Housing	Special Needs Housing	Special Achievement	Are you providing visual aids?
Encouraging New Production	Combating Homelessness	Special Achievement	Yes
Multifamily Management	Housing for Persons with Special Needs		No
Preservation and Rehabilitation			

Management Innovation – Human Resources MassHousing – Sign of the Times

MassHousing's workforce is rich in cultural and ethnic diversity. The Agency prides itself on its efforts to recruit and maintain a diverse staff which mirrors the potential homebuyers and tenants whom it serves. As testament to this, 21 languages in addition to English are spoken by various MassHousing staff members. In fact, the Agency keeps a list of volunteer staff and the foreign languages in which they are fluent, in the event that a caller or visitor to the Agency requires translation services. But it doesn't end with Spanish, Russian or Portuguese. There is another area of communication on which MassHousing also focuses. This form of communication is American Sign Language (ASL).

There are, in fact, two members of MassHousing's staff in particular who are on a mission to teach American Sign Language to their fellow employees. If their plan is successful, every employee at MassHousing will one day be able to communicate in Sign Language.

Josh Moody works in MassHousing's Information Technology (IT) Department. On his first day, he was told by his supervisor, the IT Manager of Network and Computer Services, that one of his responsibilities was to learn sign language. This was an unexpected assignment – and Josh will tell you candidly that he felt daunted by the challenge but he was very interested nevertheless and he reports now that it has proven to be one of the most transformative experiences of his career. Since 2005, Josh has become an expert in ASL and is leading a crusade of sorts to help others learn it – along with the help of his colleague, Mercy Paye.

Mercy is a deaf employee who began her employment at MassHousing as an intern from the Horace Mann School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing in Brighton, Massachusetts. The Horace Mann School is the oldest public day school for the deaf and hard of hearing in the United States. Founded in 1869, the Horace Mann School has a rich history of providing quality education for the hearing impaired. Since 2003, MassHousing has offered internships in the Agency's IT Department to students from the Horace Mann School.

MassHousing's IT Manager of Network and Community Services, Leo J. Saidnawey, was the one who first worked to bring interns from the Horace Mann School to MassHousing. This came about based on a collaboration between the Horace Mann School and the Board of the New England Chapter of the Association for Information and Image Management (AIIM). MassHousing's IT Manager was also a member of the AIIM Board and has now been appointed to the Horace Mann School Advisory board. The board helps prepare the students' transition into the hearing workplace. Each year, there are only a handful of graduating Horace Mann seniors and MassHousing takes at least two or three into its program here at the Agency.

According to Thomas Lally, MassHousing's Horace Mann School liaison, the MassHousing internship has had a profound impact on the lives and vocational futures of deaf and hard of hearing students from the Greater Boston area. This internship provides Horace Mann students with the opportunity to reinforce the Image Capture skills learned in school and gain experience performing indexing and document retrieval tasks not available in the school setting. Being mentored by a deaf graduate of the Horace Mann School, Mercy further reinforces the MassHousing internship position as Horace Mann's premier internship location. Because Mercy is deaf and communicates in ASL, students have complete communication access and the chance to work with an exemplary role model.

Mercy and Josh work to staff the “Scan Room” at MassHousing. Documents are sent to MassHousing’s “Scan Room” to be saved, catalogued and maintained in MassHousing’s OnBase™ software system which is used for document management. OnBase™ allows Agency paper documents to be scanned, stored and retrieved electronically instead of housing them at an off-site facility. New Horace Mann interns arrive approximately every six months to help in the ongoing work of scanning documents into OnBase™. It was the need to have a full time staff member in the IT department who could communicate with Mercy and the other Horace Mann School interns that led the manager in IT to “encourage” Josh to learn ASL.

Josh’s training began with a tutor who was brought into the Agency once a week for a period of time in an effort to teach Mercy and Josh to communicate with each other. Josh also began taking classes in ASL outside of the Agency to become more experienced in signing.

The idea for training beyond the IT staff grew when other MassHousing staff would go to the Scan Room to drop something off. These staffers would often see Mercy and Josh signing and comment to Josh that they wished they too could communicate with Mercy. It was, therefore, the desire of other employees to communicate with Mercy that sparked Josh’s interest in educating the rest of the Agency in Sign Language.

Mercy was not born deaf. In her native Africa, she became quite ill at the age of five. Severe ear infections and no access to medical treatment in her poor village resulted in total deafness. She emigrated from Liberia to the United States at age 20 and studied at the Horace Mann School. Her internship at MassHousing landed her a full-time position where she has become an integral part of the OnBase™ team.

Josh and Mercy thought that the best way for their MassHousing colleagues to learn ASL was for employees to get together and learn the basics from Mercy. Using material that was created by students from the Horace Mann School, Josh and Mercy offered a pilot class which was specifically designed as a “lunch-hour” class. Mercy and Josh reported the success of their pilot class to their supervisor. They then received approval to offer the class to all Agency employees, and worked to refine the curriculum.

In order to learn any foreign language, it is important to learn about the culture of the people who speak that language. In the same way, Josh and Mercy feel that in order to be successful at sign language, people really need to understand deaf culture. A PBS documentary entitled *Through Deaf Eyes* is shown during the first 30 minutes of each of the first four classes. The eye-opening documentary offers the American history of the deaf community – from the 19th Century to the present – including the creation of ASL, the influential forces of individuals from Alexander Graham Bell to Marlee Matlin, as well as the technological, cultural and educational experiences of the hearing impaired.

Josh and Mercy generally try to keep the class size at about ten employees per session. Students are taught the alphabet and numbers, and are taught how to finger spell. From there, basic vocabulary words are taught. Josh runs a PowerPoint presentation and speaks to students, and Mercy stands in front of the classroom signing the words and correcting form among the students. If there is a question, Josh signs the question to Mercy and the class, for the most part, understands Mercy’s answer.

ASL is a manual language with its own syntax and grammar, but it is not a language of just the hands and fingers. ASL involves the whole body. Facial expressions are especially important when communicating in ASL, much like using a particular tone of voice in oral communication. Mercy is animated as she acts out the words and explains the reasons behind some of the signs in front of her students. For example the sign for boy is similar to the gesture of grabbing a baseball cap on your head, or baby is to hold both arms together as if one is holding an infant. Staff also learns to sign words that are commonly used in MassHousing's offices – particularly in the Scan Room – words like "scan," "copy" and "print."

Josh and Mercy have had nothing but positive feedback from their ASL classes. The class is open to anyone who would like to attend on a first come, first served basis. Since its inception, the class has been attended by employees at all levels of the Agency – attorneys, architects, support staff, underwriters and customer service representatives – almost every department has had a staffer attend an ASL class. Staff members give up one lunch hour per week for 10 weeks and most say that it isn't something they feel like they "have" to do – but rather something they "want" to do. According to Josh, the questions that Mercy and he get show that the students are taking the class seriously and really thinking about ASL and thinking in ASL.

MassHousing is an Agency of 350 employees, and it is sometimes difficult for staff to know others outside of their own department. It is an added benefit that this class offers staff an opportunity to get to know their colleagues outside of their business area and to communicate with them on a completely different level. The opportunity to learn American Sign Language at work is a tremendous opportunity for MassHousing employees.

Josh and Mercy have taught basic ASL classes to 50 employees so far, and are working on a curriculum for an advanced class. After the first series was offered, the second series of classes was full within 24 hours of the announcement. One of the students, Jessica Nieves, is an Asset Manager in the Rental Management Division. Jessica said, "The ASL program at MassHousing is opening the door to new communication; it's amazing how just a few classes can open your eyes and heart to things we often take for granted." She went on to say, "I appreciate being able to communicate with colleagues that I never thought I'd be able to communicate with before this class."

MassHousing has formed a special bond with the Horace Mann School for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing and offered internship opportunities to deaf students – some of which have led to permanent employment. This relationship has opened the eyes of the Agency's employees to a culture that many never knew existed. It has also pushed MassHousing to interpreting services for deaf employees for Agency-wide staff meetings and celebrations so that everyone has the opportunity to participate. Perhaps most importantly, this relationship has helped Josh accomplish one of his goals – helping MassHousing staff communicates with Mercy and the Horace Mann Interns.

Mercy Paye loves being involved in teaching her language to her co-workers and to know that they are happy learning from her. It is true that no other HFA has a Mercy Paye. But all HFAs have staff with talents. The challenge is to recognize those talents and to find ways to encourage staff to share them with each other.

Visual Aid

Video: http://youtu.be/Bd_7a4WS10Y