

2009 NCSHA Annual Awards – Special Achievement  
Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority  
Community Job Fairs

*“With our past tax credit projects in central Milwaukee, we noticed that all the jobs these developments created weren’t always reaching the neighborhoods where they were being built. The housing would go up in their backyard yet many residents remained unemployed. These job fairs give us an avenue to reach out to these residents and give them an opportunity to stop watching these projects and start contributing towards a stronger neighborhood by helping to construct an affordable housing development,” said WHEDA Executive Director Antonio Riley.*

Stories about unemployment rates have topped newscasts and been front page newspaper stories for more than year in the United States. In cities like Milwaukee, WI, unemployment can be a life story for people living in the central city. The Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority (WHEDA) has allocated millions of dollars on Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC) for developments in those neighborhoods, and has been the catalyst for job creation around the state through that program. But it wasn’t until WHEDA and its partners started to look around those very neighborhoods that they realized they could have an even greater impact.

WHEDA’s Emerging Business program was established in 2005 under Executive Director Antonio Riley to encourage the involvement, utilization and development of emerging businesses on LIHTC developments. In 2007, the Emerging Business program went a step further and began to work with select developers to reach out to the people living in the blocks surrounding these new developments to train them and give them an opportunity at work and be self-sufficient.

The first project was Boulevard Commons, in Milwaukee, which hired 13 of the 85 people who attended the job fair. Within a year, the City of Madison held a community job fair in the troubled Allied Drive neighborhood, where more than 135 people showed up for 15 contractor jobs. After experiencing high turnouts for the first two job fairs, WHEDA and its partners knew they had an opportunity to make an even greater impact in the communities where they worked.

**Demonstrated need:**

Newspaper stories have covered the high unemployment rates among black males in Milwaukee – as many as 1 in 2 black men in the central city do not work. Add a deep recession to that, and we are looking at widespread unemployment. With so many inner city residents struggling to find work, these job fairs offer employment opportunities to residents in the construction of affordable housing developments, and helps create a sense of investment in their community.

As the first job fairs demonstrated, demand for these jobs far outnumbered the actual available positions.

**Process:**

WHEDA worked with each participating developer and general contractor to put together community information sessions for unemployed residents.

They filled out applications, learned about the jobs available, and were taught basic interview skills. WHEDA partnered with local job training and workforce development organizations to provide that training.

A few weeks later, a job fair was held at a community center – the local Boys and Girls Club gym or a neighborhood senior center. The job fairs, though open to the public, were not widely advertised as the intent was to focus on the neighborhood residents, and there were a small number of skilled jobs actually available.

In each case, the contractor committed to hiring one individual per subcontractor for the neighborhood – amounting to 15 or 20 individuals per site.

To supplement that, WHEDA began to work with other employers from the neighborhood – drug stores, fast food restaurants, and grocery stores. As many as ten other employers have attended the job fairs to provide additional working opportunities for the folks who showed up.

**At the job fairs:**

Each job fair had its own unique story of people wanting work. In Madison, at the Allied Drive location, more than 115 people had preregistered for the 15 jobs. Despite a blizzard, over 135 people came to inquire about the opportunities.

In Milwaukee for the Bishop's Creek development, the job fair at the Boys and Girls Club gymnasium had men lined up out the door and into the parking lot waiting for a chance to get in. Over 300 individuals pre-registered for the 16 construction-related positions.

**The program at work:**

Many contractors have reported that the workers they hired for the jobs have been hired back on other projects.

Perhaps no example of success is more evident though than that of Prairie Apartments in downtown Milwaukee. Prairie Apartments is an 18-unit housing facility developed in part by Heartland Housing of Chicago and Guest House Milwaukee, a transitional shelter for homeless men. Guest House's residents

received training from Big Step, a non-profit organization devoted to family-sustaining jobs in the greater Milwaukee area.

In the end, five formerly homeless, unemployed men went on to work construction, security and cleaning jobs at Prairie Apartments. When it came time for Prairie Apartment's grand opening, Executive Director Riley hoped to introduce the men who had gone from homeless and unemployed to residents of a new apartment building with real job skills. Unfortunately, he could not – all five were working at a new job.

Although the number of construction-related jobs is limited at the job fairs, they are exclusive to neighborhood residents. In the case of the Bishop's Creek event, resident hires made up over 20% of the total construction jobs created through the project.

**Conclusion:**

WHEDA recognizes that as the state's LIHTC allocating agency, it wields a good deal of power in holding those resources. LIHTC developments create hundreds of construction jobs in the state each year – jobs that pay family-supporting wages. While we can't end poverty or fix the high unemployment rates, we can take a serious dent out of the number of inner city men who don't have access to training, jobs, and ultimately, opportunity.