

**National Council of State Housing Agencies
2012 Annual Awards for Program Excellence**

Category: Communications – Creative Media
Nominator: New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency
Nominee: New Jersey Housing Resource Center

The New Jersey Housing Resource Center (HRC) is a cutting edge one-stop-shop online housing database that combines innovative, web-based technology with professional call center support to offer solutions for a wide array of housing needs. The HRC provides quick links to thousands of available units around the State as well as numerous resources to assist with challenges across the housing spectrum, such as accessibility and foreclosure prevention in a user-friendly and interactive format.

The HRC site operates essentially as a free online housing listing service with an extremely helpful and reliable call center. The HRC also provides additional features for those who are seeking disability/accessibility features, affordability related search options and other community amenities not typically listed on most housing search engines, a tremendous for resource housing seekers and property owners alike.

The HRC was created in 2005 as the result of an agreement between the New Jersey Housing and Mortgage Finance Agency (HMFA or the Agency) and the New Jersey Department of Human Services, Division of Disability Services, to develop an easy to use and widely accessible web-based service to assist all people, particularly those with a disability or long-term illness, to be able to find sufficient housing and participate in their communities in a meaningful way.

To fulfill this goal, the Agency partnered with a national provider of housing location services, Socialserve.com, and effectively leveraged Agency resources to create a tool that increases critical access to housing information for the entire state. Socialserve.com was and continues to be the perfect partner for this endeavor, as the organization is a nonprofit with a national network that has award winning customer service and whose mission is to maximize community access to housing information.

Innovative

The HRC addresses a multitude of housing needs across the continuum, from homelessness to homeownership, special needs housing to disaster relocation, and much more through a web-based tool that is innovative in its effectiveness, thoroughness, ease of use and efficiency. No other housing resource offers this magnitude of data management and human interaction.

The HRC is designed with the user in mind, to maximize accessibility and increase the user's ability to conduct detailed customized searches, currently not offered by any other search engine in the State. The site is multi-faceted, offering service in both English and Spanish online, as well as via toll-free phone, fax, mail and email. User accessibility is further increased by making it 100% free to list and search for properties and resources on the site. The HRC offers 30 general and advanced search fields, such as whether a credit check is required or if vouchers are accepted, and 24 specialized accessibility/disability search options, such as whether there is a ramped entry or elevators. The site features a median income calculator and rent affordability tools that help renters locate properties that they can afford. Further, search results can be displayed on a map, and a proximity search locates properties within a selected distance from desired locations, such as work, school or even a family member's house.

The HRC also offers a special populations housing search that provides additional customized search options. This search provides landlords with a way to privately promote their properties to a variety of

special needs groups, such as veterans, the frail and elderly, and physically disabled individuals. By giving landlords a free and unique way to market housing to targeted populations, this secure service also increases mixed housing options for special needs clients. In addition, state authorized agencies can search for housing that meets client needs without sacrificing privacy or confidentiality.

Replicable

The partnership with Socialserve.com not only means that the service is continually supported by a sustainable, national agency, it also means that the HRC is a replicable model that can be implemented in any state or locality. Socialserve.com currently powers similar services, scaled and customized to meet regional needs in 32 states across the country. This collaborative national network of housing agency partners inspires frequent feature additions and service upgrades to streamline delivery of services. Enhancements such as rent reasonableness, interactive utility calculators, and GIS mapping of rental housing data are just a few of the innovations now available to New Jersey residents thanks to the partnership behind the HRC.

Achieves Measurable Results

The HRC works integrally with the Agency's mission of helping families across the State find decent and safe housing opportunities. The site has also worked tremendously well in terms of helping special needs populations find housing that is accessible and meets their needs. Over 14 million searches have been conducted on the service since 2005. Besides accommodating the listings of over 4,300 landlords statewide and serving over 8,000 housing searches weekly, the HRC database contains information on nearly 60,000 affordable units in New Jersey, which include not only available units, but also those that are rented and under repair. Daily available units average around 4,000 and usage numbers continue to grow. Being free to use has increased the amount and range of units available on the service meaning that more affordable units are available to the public via the HRC.

Benefits Outweigh Costs, Effective Use of Resources

The benefits of the HRC are truly priceless and vastly outweigh the Agency's cost to maintain the service. Since its inception, the HRC has helped thousands of people find housing. Besides offering a constant stream of current housing information and support for residents, the HRC provides vital housing information for disaster preparedness, a benefit for housing agencies across the state, and a bank of up-to-date housing data that can assist policy makers with program and resource related decisions. .

The call center that staffs the HRC is warm, professional and truly unique. Call center representatives are compassionate and are highly trained to handle calls for all types of assistance, from general intake, accessibility questions, and referral for disaster. Unlike many others, the Socialserve.com call center does not have time limits on calls and can spend as much time as needed to assist residents with locating available housing opportunities.

Detailed, up-to-date listings and the breadth of call center assistance make the HRC an especially valuable tool for public housing authorities as well. The site allows property owners to indicate subsidies associated with units, such as Housing Choice Vouchers and income-based options, and in turn, housing counselors and individuals can search listings for units that meet individual needs and voucher specifications. The HRC also provides vacancy listings management for voucher programs which provides immense time savings for housing agencies. In addition, easy-to-use rent comparison tools generate printable documentation for convenience, and most importantly, draw from the most accurate and current rental market information available.

Reaching Targeted Audiences

The HRC is designed to be completely accessible to all targeted audiences, from landlords and developers to tenants and individuals with special needs. Training and ongoing support is continually offered on

HRC features to ensure that users are maximizing their experience with the site. While web-based, the toll-free call center ensures that even those without internet access can list and search for housing and resources.

Getting started on the HRC is simple and always free for residents looking for housing and property owners alike. Landlords complete a quick registration to list properties so they can be contacted to confirm that listings are current, while housing seekers can search anonymously, which helps preserve tenant confidentiality and reduce Fair Housing violations. HRC housing listings and resource information are regularly monitored and updated, supplying residents with current housing information for day-to-day use.

The HRC has enhanced features to make searching for a home with accessible features easy and transparent. The website is ADA-compliant and meets web accessibility standards. This means easier navigation of online tools with helpful technology like screen readers and speech recognition software and maximizes access for all. The call center connects to TTY/TDD relay services, and call center representatives provide extensive assistance with all aspects of the service, including detailed housing searches. The United Way 2-1-1 service can also send callers in need of housing to the HRC toll-free number for comprehensive assistance. Lastly, tenants can use the “accessible” search tool to look for housing with a broad range of features for those who are disabled, such as no-step entry, ramped access and lever-style door handles.

Property owners are provided with the unique ability to proactively market specific features and attract desired tenants. For example, property owners are able to advertise features that set their properties apart, such as accessibility features, eligibility requirements and proximity to public transit and schools. The high level of detail helps to more quickly match qualified tenants with the right units that fit their needs. The service is continually kept up-to-date through a thoroughly vetted tracking system that is convenient for property owners to use and implement.

Conclusion

The HRC is one of a kind and has become a valued and tested resource for residents and property owners alike. The HRC offers an unbelievable amount of searchable information and call center support, and it has been essential in helping families and special needs individuals across the State find affordable housing. Without a resource such as the HRC, it would certainly be more difficult for low and moderate income families to find housing that meets their needs in New Jersey. The Housing Resource Center is truly a precious and critical housing resource worthy of recognition for all that it does.