

# NCSHA 2016 Annual Awards Entry Form

(Complete one form for each entry)

**Deadline: Wednesday, June 15, 2016**

Visit [ncsha.org/awards](http://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 [awards@ncsha.org](mailto:awards@ncsha.org) or 202-624-7710.

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.**

<b>Communications</b>	<b>Homeownership</b>	<b>Legislative Advocacy</b>	<b>Management Innovation</b>
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
<b>Rental Housing</b>	<b>Special Needs Housing</b>	<b>Special Achievement</b>	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			

## Communications – Annual Report

During the past few years, our communications team has made a concerted effort to build on the successes from the prior year's annual report to make improvements and gain cost efficiencies. We've not only critiqued our own work, but we've also paid close attention to the work of other HFAs and of private sector firms. Additionally, we've listened to feedback from the various audiences for this publication. We're pleased with the progress we've made in modernizing our annual report and improving its communications effectiveness. We'd like to share some of the things we feel have worked well for us and have gained strong, positive responses from our customers and business partners. We will share insights that are easily replicable by any other HFA.

Based on our experience, we believe there are some annual report responsibilities that are best handled internally and others better undertaken by outside vendors. For instance, we think the report's coordination and messaging are best handled by our communications staff, so we do all the story interviews and text creation. While we have a small communications staff of three, two are former journalists. So writing is one of our strengths, plus we think we can tell our HFA's story much better than an outside writer ever could because we live it every day.

For the last several years, we have outsourced the graphic design, photography, printing, and fulfillment related to this publication. Using private sector graphic designers and photographers, we think, provides the highest quality in those two areas. Additionally, the high-end printing and mailing of 3,000 reports is simply beyond our capabilities given the print quality we desire. Our annual report is one of our main marketing pieces, so it has to be top-notch. Our communications staff does play a critical role by letting each of these firms suggest creative ideas for enhancing the report and bringing all of their different ideas together in a way that supports the report's theme in a unified way.

### **Lessons learned**

Important lessons we have learned are to keep the stories short, easy to understand, and well supported with professional photography and simple infographics. With today's busy schedules, convincing someone to take five minutes to learn more about the work of a housing finance agency is no small challenge. Our best chance for success is to make the stories so inviting that they draw the reader in. We think we accomplish that with this year's annual report.

Like NCSHA, we are big believers in the power of storytelling. That is why we go to the trouble of identifying customers for our main housing programs from across Pennsylvania who will let us share the stories of how they were helped by our agency. Communications research also demonstrates that marketing pieces in which customers describe their firsthand experiences are deemed more credible than self-promotions. The reaction to our annual report bears that out. In choosing our annual report testimonials, we identify people of various ages, genders, income levels and racial backgrounds, as well as people with disabilities, since they all represent the customer base we serve. Customers from locations across Pennsylvania are also key since this reinforces our statewide impact.

### **A strong first impression**

Our PHFA staff came up with the idea of making the report cover look like a welcome mat. But it was our graphic designer and printer who suggesting adding some texture to reinforce this effect. No cover in recent memory has drawn the attention of this year's cover. We credit it with getting people to pause and actually open the report. So, in our opinion, the importance of the cover should never be downplayed.

Another strong design element is the use of peek-a-boo pages with each of the customer stories. These trimmed pages reveal photo elements on the coming pages and create a feeling of anticipation and surprise. We credit our design firm with that suggestion.

### **Text, but not too much**

Our agency communications staff not only wrote the customer testimonials but wrote all the other text in the report, as well. A strong emphasis was placed on keeping the text concise, simple and descriptive. Acronyms were avoided whenever possible, and if used they were always explained. Recognizing that too much text can discourage engagement, we broke up the text and reinforced the messages, with clean and simple infographics. We are fortunate to work with a graphic design firm that has expertise in this area. Even the simplified state maps that accompany each customer story, identifying their hometown, play an important role by visually reinforcing the statewide reach of our housing programs. We had not made much use of pull-quotes in past years, but we did not overlook that design tool in this report. Our emphasis of customer quotes that go to the heart of their PHFA experience, we believe, makes a powerful impact.

In the past, the financial pages were a larger section of our annual report. Our communications team used the past several years to educate our financial staff as to how the best organizations were now putting most of their financial data online and, thereby, strengthening the storytelling element of their annual reports. This year, everyone at our agency was comfortable with that approach. Two pages of key financial information are still included. That data provides a high-level snapshot of our financial performance and it is supported with infographics (as elsewhere in the report) to simplify the presentation of information for readers from all sorts of backgrounds.

Our goal was to create an annual report that would communicate its main messages even if the reader only skimmed the headlines, glanced over the photos and captions, and perused the infographics – because that is, in fact, what we think happens in most instances today. We think our product accomplishes that objective. Even a casual reader, we believe, will come away with an appreciation for the work done by our housing finance agency.

### **Reaching our audience**

We print and mail 3,000 annual reports. Recipients include multifamily property owners and managers, our lending partners, investors, state and local government leaders, and our counseling agencies. Some reports are saved for distribution during senior fairs, community expos and other public outreach events. The strong reaction this year from all these audience groups indicates that our annual report hits the mark.

We have worked hard to produce an annual report rivaling that of private sector firms while still holding down costs. Our annual reports for the last few years have all been produced at a cost of less than \$30,000. This includes all the graphic design work, professional photography with customers across Pennsylvania, the high-end printing of the final product, and its mailing. In fact, we have found ways to extend the value of this investment by taking the annual report photos and reusing them in a promotional video, on our website, and in our brochures. Plus the annual report stories are repeated on our website to help them reach a broader audience. So the impact of this investment in our annual report is multiplied by the creative repurposing of the report's stories and photography.

This year's annual report is designed in a way to make it compelling for readers so that they want to explore it, and many will keep it to reference later. Additionally, the messaging succeeds in conveying the powerful work done by our housing finance agency – even to readers who previously had no understanding of what an HFA does. That, we feel, is the mark of successful communications tool.