

## **'More than four walls and a roof' Management Innovation: Human Resources**

### **Overview**

Rhode Island Housing has always believed that our mission goes beyond finding people a home. A 'home' to us is much more than four walls and a roof – it is the people within and the community around. We also recognize that 'four walls and a roof' are critical as they provide the foundation upon which individuals and families thrive, children learn and grow and communities prosper. To that end we decided to partner with our local Habitat for Humanity on a year-long effort in which our staff members would help build a home for a deserving family.

### **Our Commitment**

We reached out to the Habitat for Humanity of Rhode Island - Greater Providence office and offered our assistance. Habitat Providence is a nonprofit organization dedicated to building decent, affordable houses for low-income families who currently live in substandard housing. We committed to partnering with Habitat throughout the year on a regular basis until the home was completed.

To have the greatest impact, and to allow everyone an opportunity to participate, we scheduled our volunteer days on most Wednesdays beginning in October 2011. Our Human Resources department recruited 10-15 staff members to help out each week, rotating staff so as not to have a negative impact on a department/division. Additionally, each staff person that signed up needed to have approval from his/her supervisor to ensure that we all continued to work toward our mission.

Our volunteer initiative started just after the foundation had been poured. HR staff scheduled transportation for staff to and from the site and provided lunch and snacks. Staff volunteers would leave Rhode Island Housing around 8:45 a.m. and return by 4 p.m. each day. Volunteers are not required to have any special skills so everyone could get involved in the effort. To date, each department/division has participated, including our Executive Director and division directors.

### **Meeting Strategic Objectives**

Besides the obvious positive outcome of creating a new home for a family and how it relates to the work of Rhode Island Housing, our agency benefited from this initiative as it helped meet our Human Resources strategic objectives. With little funding available for HR activities and initiatives, our staff participation has already resulted in a happier and more engaged staff, with greatly improved staff participation than previous HR initiatives.

The program meets HR goals by bolstering employee morale and fostering team work, all while helping those in the communities we serve. We have found that the majority of our staff work at Rhode Island Housing because they truly believe in our mission. While they receive professional job satisfaction working here, most are looking for personal satisfaction as well. Staff participation illustrates our employees' sense of strong public purpose and hope for a better tomorrow. No other program has brought together so many staff from all divisions of the agency to work together.

The program complements the work that we do while helping us retain qualified and committed staff, developing a fun and rewarding work place, expanding our internal culture and engaging our

employees. The year-long effort helps to bring our staff together, breaking down ‘walls’ among divisions, getting people together who share common goals and interests. The program connects all staff, whether they work in Development, Homeownership, Intergovernmental Relations, Loan Servicing, Resident Services, IT, Finance, Administration, etc to our mission in a personal and meaningful way. With more than 220 employees in three different buildings, this project has allowed staff the opportunity to interact with others who they may not have had the opportunity to before.

We regularly supply updates on the progress we have made via emails, postings to our intranet site, slide shows and updates at full staff meetings. Our Executive Director encourages everyone to participate and sends a positive message to staff regarding their involvement.

Employees have reported that these activities help them feel good about themselves and proud of the role Rhode Island Housing plays throughout the state. A happier staff has resulted in improved employee retention; improved work performance; and has helped with employee recruitment as community members and partner organizations are aware of our efforts as a change agent. By offering our time, energy, talent and passion to those in need, in the communities we serve, we support our mission while also reinforcing that Rhode Island Housing is a great place to work, with caring, compassionate and engaged staff. The public’s awareness of our philanthropic efforts has also helped in strengthening our relationships with nonprofits, community-based agencies and others while also providing us with a platform to continue our outreach and fulfill our mission.

### **The Program**

Administered in-house by our Human Resources staff, the program has been embraced agency-wide as a way to give back to the communities and people we serve. It started as a simple idea: allowing all staff to participate in the Habitat build, it has flourished into a feel-good effort that has had a significant impact on the lives of others while allowing for professional and personal growth of our employees. The fact that our volunteer efforts rely on physical activity has also helped reduce stress for staff and offered them an opportunity to learn hands on building/construction tools they can use in their own lives.

### **The Results**

We arrived on the site on Oct. 1 to find only a foundation. It was our responsibility to create the rest of the home. We constructed all of the walls; installed windows, put on a roof, siding and trim and painted the interior and exterior. We have been and continue to be involved with all aspects and phases of construction. Throughout the year-long volunteer effort, our staff members’ participation and enthusiasm have increased rather than decreased.

This initiative came at the best time for Rhode Island Housing. As a result of the continued economic recession and housing market, we have had to make reductions in staff; shifted employees where needed; and increased the workload for just about every staff member over the past year. Our participation in this endeavor has helped us not just increase morale but actually do so at a time when most companies have declining morale.

### **Why it is meritorious:**

*Innovative:* a true mission oriented approach to volunteerism and helping others while achieving strategic objectives.

*Replicable:* program can easily be adapted and implemented by other states in partnership with local Habitat offices or other such entities.

*Respond to a management challenge or opportunity:* retention and recruitment of qualified and committed staff who actively support our mission is critical to this HFA's success.

*Achieve measurable improvements in agency operations:* we have witnessed improved work performance across all divisions based upon improved morale, strengthened relationships among staff and team building efforts.

*Provide benefits that outweigh costs:* by working to ensure that there is always adequate staff coverage within each department, we have not experienced any loss to work output but have greatly improved work performance and employee morale.

*Demonstrate effective use of resources:* our HR staff are able to facilitate volunteer activities and individuals within each division have proactively taken on the role of team leaders; the program utilizes staff time and talent and requires little to no funding.

*Achieve strategic objectives:* has increased staff morale and participation, built and strengthened our partnership with Habitat, heightened awareness of our role in communities and the people we serve.



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