

## ENTRY DESCRIPTION

### 2009 NCSHA Annual Awards for Program Excellence

#### OUR PLAN

Determining how our programs can best assist low- to moderate-income families and individuals is vital to making sure New Hampshire Housing succeeds in its mission. While working toward the goal of providing a balanced housing supply within the Granite State, over the years the agency recognized the need to have an action plan as well as some standard measures of achievement to determine our level of success in meeting our strategic priorities. Each year our Strategic Plan positions the agency to work with partners, maximizes limited resources, strengthens program actions/decisions and focuses staff and the Board of Directors on initiatives that carry our mission.

Within the past few years, New Hampshire Housing has taken the planning process further to create a living document that truly guides the agency and helps us track our progress in a more direct manner. The plan is based on external factors such as current economic, political, and market conditions anticipated for the upcoming year and beyond, and internal factors including our financial position as well as administrative resources. Some key points that make our plan meritorious are as follows:

- **All program activities directly tie back to the mission.** We have moved to a methodology and reporting style within the last two planning cycles that helps senior staff make direct links between our programmatic/operational activities and our strategic priorities. We have also integrated administrative initiatives into operational areas such as communications, IT, human resources and facilities so program and administrative staff can work together in a much more coordinated way to achieve desired outcomes. This integration of administrative initiatives into the Strategic Plan has, in fact, fostered greater cross-divisional sharing of information and a tendency to consider the bigger picture, internally as well as externally, when designing and implementing programs.

Because the Strategic Plan keeps New Hampshire Housing focused on maintaining mission-serving activities, we can more easily identify and respond to new challenges or opportunities as they arise.

- **It serves as a communication cornerstone.** From January to May each year, senior staff are busy with the task of updating the Strategic Plan. So that the planning process is not done in a vacuum, each year we also encourage feedback from our business partners. With personal conversations, group meetings and brief e-mail surveys our partners tell us how we might improve our business methods and program processes as well as address any potential program or service needs they see from their "on the ground" perspective.

Every 2 to 3 years, we go even further and hire a consultant to conduct confidential interviews with a selected range of our business partners – including

some we anticipate may not give us a glowing review. The responses are reported back to New Hampshire Housing anonymously in a report that provides an unbiased assessment of how we're doing, what we can improve upon programmatically, and how we can strengthen communications with our business partners.

The Strategic Plan also allows us to present what we're doing, and demonstrate why it's important, to our Board as well as the general public. In addition, the planning process allows for transparency when it comes to allocating funds, which minimizes conflict over resources within our agency.

- **The plan holds staff accountable and helps us measure achievement.** There are many ways to measure achievement, and New Hampshire Housing has begun to delve into how to determine success. Sometimes there are landmarks that illuminate years of hard work, such as the passing of legislation or a milestone number of mortgage financings. But we have agreed upon other measures to keep track of daily programmatic activity and to hold staff accountable for making progress with strategic objectives.

Requiring the completion of quarterly reports on program and administrative activities provides a management and measurement tool. These reports are released to the Board and staff to keep everyone informed on agency operations. Further, the Board and staff can actually see how we're doing against the Strategic Plan as well as determine whether external conditions warrant adjustment in strategy from what was originally outlined in the plan.

In addition, division managers are held responsible for program objectives set forth in the Strategic Plan. Specific goals are incorporated into staff performance reviews at all levels to ensure the planning process is more than just an exercise for senior staff members.

**Preparing for the future in dollars and sense.** The Strategic Plan is the basis for our annual program budgeting. Agency-wide budgeting is carried out for the year with the knowledge of the financial forecast for the next 3 to 5 years. Under special circumstances, we ask our accounting team to make predictions for as far down the road as the next 10 years! This longer-sighted outlook helps make certain our programs will continue to help our target population despite fluctuations in the economy.

For example, while New Hampshire Housing did not predict the extent of national mortgage crisis or the exact effect it would have on bond and tax credit markets, during the boom years before the crisis we allocated our resources appropriately and avoided risky business decisions. This conservative and well-planned approach has saved New Hampshire Housing from the hard decisions other housing agencies are facing.

### **INNOVATIVE AND REPLICABLE**

Other organizations can easily adopt this form of strategic planning. Important and, we believe, innovative components of the process are that program and administrative activities outlined in the Strategic Plan directly tie back to the core mission, and that annual budgeting and financial forecasting are fully integrated into the plan to keep the document relevant. In addition, while any new programs or activities need to go through the strategic planning process to determine how well they fit the mission and objectives of the agency, that does not preclude our ability to take advantage of new program opportunities should they arise mid-year. While senior staff may groan at the thought of many hours of meetings and “homework” that the planning process generates, this process allows for an evaluation of the fiscal year’s key issues as well as how the agency responded. In turn, program outcomes can be examined in an effort to strengthen weaknesses and repeat successes.

### **BENEFITS OUTWEIGH COSTS**

This planning process does require a significant investment in staff time and involves hiring an outside consultant every 2 to 3 years for the purpose of anonymously gaining our partners’ input. However, the benefits far outweigh costs when you consider the agency is funding programs that make a difference to our target constituencies. Since its inception, New Hampshire Housing has helped nearly 37,000 families purchase their own homes and has been instrumental in financing the creation of more than 14,000 multi-family housing units in a state with only 1.2 million people.

In addition, the agency’s dedication to a thoughtful mission-driven strategic planning process with sound financial forecasts helped us to avoid risky investment practices during the greater part of this decade, and we now have the resources to maintain operations as well as avoid desperate cost-saving measures such as layoffs. This keeps staff morale high and guarantees New Hampshire Housing can continue with its endeavors when low- to moderate-income families and individuals need us most.

### **CONCLUSION**

Because of an in-depth planning process, our Strategic Plan is a vital living document that guides the agency even in today’s changing market conditions. Comprehensive financial forecasts allow New Hampshire Housing to continue its operations, and feedback from our Board of Directors as well as our business partners helps the agency react appropriately to current issues. Further, making sure all our activities directly link to our mission means we are supporting only those programs that best serve the needs of our state’s hard-working families.