

NAME OF ENTRY: COMMUNICATIONS—CREATIVE MEDIA
Annual housing/wages report

HFA: VERMONT

VHFA's strategic objectives include public education, policy development and advocacy as to the needs and benefits of affordable housing. The single most effective tool in this work is the yearly report produced by the Agency entitled, "Between A Rock and A Hard Place: Housing and Wages in Vermont."

The housing/wages report, as it is commonly known, plays a major role in the Agency's strategic communications and reinforces our leadership position on housing policy and advocacy. This year saw the seventh edition of the report, and its success in reaching key target audiences—primarily local and state officials, housing advocates, business/community leaders and journalists—is demonstrated by the fact that it has become the single most widely-used reference (the touchstone, if you will) on the need for affordable housing in the state. When reporters write housing stories, this report is cited as the source for key data, such as the median purchase price of a home. If a public official, business leader or housing advocate is making a speech or giving legislative testimony, this is the report to which they commonly refer. And it has reached beyond Vermont to become a model for other organizations; for example, it was incorporated into a presentation by staff from the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston.

The fact that the housing/wages report has become the common reference is particularly important; because discussion of housing affordability in Vermont no longer stalls over whose numbers are more accurate. The housing/wages report is now the baseline, and we no longer debate the parameters of Vermont's housing shortage. We are now focused on solutions. With its broad reach, the report has also brought together constituencies, including the business community, low-income advocates, and economists, who did not previously recognize affordable housing as "their" issue but who are now stakeholders. This proved particularly important during this past legislative session, when we were debating a comprehensive housing bill that ultimately passed. The housing/wages report, released in the middle of the debate, was on the table in every committee hearing where testimony was presented.

More than 3,000 hard copies of the housing/wages report are distributed each year, with thousands more downloaded from the Agency's website. (To date, the weblink to the 2008 edition has received more than 5,200 hits on the VHFA site.) Copies are delivered to every member of the state legislature; to the Governor, Lt. Governor and key officials in the administration; to our Congressional delegation; to the housing industry state-wide, from homeless shelter operators to the Homebuilders Association, to chambers of commerce, to members of service organizations, to business and community leaders, and to the media.

Each edition of the report receives wide media attention upon its release, and that event in and of itself is an opportunity for state-wide organizing on behalf of affordable housing. With each release, we contact housing supporters and local leaders in towns across the

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state, preparing them to talk about the report and the issue of affordable housing to media in their communities, so the story becomes localized. This is backed up with visits to editorial boards, radio talk shows and other outlets.

All this impact comes at modest cost. Other than staff time, the only expense is printing and mailing, which amount to about \$1 per copy. Content focuses on two areas—updating key housing and wage information and highlighting new issues or new data.

This year's report, for example, expanded wage and job data to show how, while housing prices in Vermont have continued to climb—albeit at a slower pace—wages for most Vermonters have stagnated, and, more importantly for broader policy arguments, Vermont's job creation is almost solely happening in low-wage service employment.

The housing/wages report is a particularly effective use of resources in that, in both content and format, it is highly “user-friendly” and would be easily and inexpensively replicable by any HFA or housing organization who would like to adopt it. The report's meticulous sourcing and overall design contribute to its effectiveness. The sourcing reinforces its credibility, and the VHFA staffer in charge of design has created a series of eye-catching covers and kept a consistent look inside. The report features a highly readable text and clear supporting graphics, which themselves are often replicated as charts for presentations.

This series of reports began in 2002 after discussions among VHFA staff and other housing advocates about the need for an information/advocacy piece that would clearly demonstrate Vermont's housing affordability gap, the result of modest wages and rapidly-rising rents and home prices.

VHFA staff co-directed the production of the first report with staff from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board and the Vermont Affordable Housing Coalition. From 2003 on, VHFA staffers have assumed responsibility for production of the report, with staff from VHCB and the Coalition serving as contributors and peer reviewers. While the report is a VHFA production, it is issued under the umbrellas of the Vermont Housing Council, the Governor's advisory group on housing issues, and the Vermont Housing Awareness Campaign, a statewide public education coalition with 41 public- and private-sector partners. VHFA is a leading member of the Housing Council, and VHFA staff manages the Awareness Campaign. This strategy reinforces the effectiveness of the report as an organizing/information tool, as other members of both organizations take a sense of ownership in it.