

Background/Description

Since 2007, the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority (WHEDA) and the Wisconsin REALTORS® Association (WRA) have partnered to develop and sustain an employer assisted housing initiative that educates Wisconsin employers and employees, real estate professionals, lenders, and other consumers on the value of homeownership. WHEDA and WRA developed a comprehensive curriculum on employer assisted housing, or workforce housing, that included housing resources, case studies and other information for employers wishing to start their own program.

Building upon its past success, WHEDA and WRA greatly enhanced the program in 2010 to help more Wisconsin communities improve the quality of life for its workforce while helping local employers recruit and retain more employees. Earlier this year, thanks to an \$80,000 grant from the National Association of REALTORS® (NAR), WHEDA and WRA broadened the program's reach by launching, WisconsinHousingWorks.com, a web site designed to help walk employers, local governments, real estate professionals, home buyers, nonprofits and lenders through the process of creating an employer assisted housing program.

The newly named Wisconsin Housing Works program now has a web site that provides users with information about workforce housing programs, while helping them to identify roles and responsibilities and design a program that meets their specific housing needs. A majority of the grant funding from NAR was spent on the web site, while the rest of the funding is going toward training and outreach to increase participation in the Wisconsin Housing Works program.

More real estate professionals, lenders and nonprofit housing counseling agencies can now become trained in implementing a workforce housing program. Offered by NAR Authorized Instructors, more training classes will now be offered explaining the benefits of Wisconsin Housing Works, while walking interested parties through the process of creating a program and sustaining long-term economic stability in a community. WHEDA is responsible for scheduling and implementing training classes.

Responding to an important need

As in many states, Wisconsin has experienced a decline in the housing and real estate markets. To overcome challenges including decreased home prices, higher down-payment requirements, and lack of access to housing near employers, this workforce housing program was implemented by WHEDA and WRA across the state.

Location relative to the workplace is one of the most important factors when it comes to buying a home. That's why with the Wisconsin Housing Works program, WHEDA works with employers to develop individualized employer assisted housing programs, creating employee loyalty and a more financially stable workforce.

Many of these programs even offer financial assistance to help their employees with a down payment and closing costs. Currently, 17 employers are participating in this workforce housing program including:

- **Gundersen Lutheran® Health System:** Neighborhood Employee Incentive Program offers a one-time payment to employees after closing on a home, in which the dollar amount is equal to the time-of-purchase tax bill for that property.
- **Lincoln Lutheran of Racine:** Created a workforce housing program to meet the needs of a specific employee. Now offers \$5,000 forgivable grant to employees if remained employed at the company for five years.
- **Meriter Hospital:** Offers \$10,000 forgivable down payment grants to employees living in two local neighborhoods if remaining employed at the hospital for five years.
- **Boys & Girls Club of Greater Milwaukee:** Offers \$500 forgivable grants to employees living in the City of Milwaukee if remaining employed at the Boys & Girls Club for one year.
- **Northwestern Mutual:** Offers \$2,500 forgivable grant to employees if remaining employed at the company for three years.

Previously, WHEDA and WRA had to send workforce housing resources as hard copies in the mail or via email. With the new web site, the program is much more efficient and reaches a much broader audience across state. Now the program not only delivers more information helping to expand the number of participating employers, it also contains lists of available employer assisted housing programs and what each employer offers, documentation needed to create a program, and a variety of other training materials to expand its total number of consumers.

WHEDA and WRA expect to train an additional 100 lenders, real estate professionals and counselors to become certified employer assisted housing professionals thanks to the web site. It's expected that those newly certified professionals will help to enroll a minimum of five new employers by the end of 2010, which would provide over 100 employees with home buyer education, ultimately leading to new homeowners.

Innovation

WHEDA is the first and only Housing Finance Agency in the country to partner with the REALTORS to receive a national grant and to develop such a robust program.

Now with the first workforce housing web site on the market, interested employers and consumers can access testimonials from existing employers who have utilized an employer assisted housing program, On Demand Presentation Overviews, and links to other workforce housing programs.

In an effort to capitalize on today's social media boom, WHEDA and WRA also created both [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) accounts for Wisconsin Housing Works to help spread the word about the expansion of the program. Fans of these sites are able to share success stories, receive updates on programs and services, ask questions to program representatives and welcome new employers into the fold.

In addition to working with employers, municipalities and interested Realtors, we are in the process of putting together a training session for all of Prudential Realty's Wisconsin-based relocation agents. After Prudential brought this idea to WHEDA, we realized that relocation agents were another untapped workforce housing connection.

Achieve intended results

Aggressive outreach and promotion of the web site is rapidly expanding the Wisconsin Housing Works program. Since the site went live in late May, WHEDA has performed two training sessions and scheduled two more for August and September 2010. There have been several meeting requests to set up additional training classes, and WHEDA has also met with several employers since the roll-out including Franciscan Health System, The University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and the City of Onalaska, and has appointments to meet with more later on in 2010.

The web site has experienced a good amount of traffic in its first few months. As of June 30th, [WisconsinHousingWork.com](#) had been visited over 1,500 times, with page views in excess of 3,200 hits.

Creating and supporting the Wisconsin Housing Works initiative fits directly with WHEDA's strategic plans and overall mission to encourage homeownership and promote affordable housing. WHEDA is giving employees and other consumers an opportunity to gain financial literacy skills, and trusted homeownership preparation along with the potential for accessing down payment and closing costs resources.

Employers also gain a more financially stable workforce and an impact in the local options to assist employees in homeownership preparation. All in all, this helps communities benefit from more homeowners, which builds a stronger tax base and more stable neighborhoods.