

CHFA Study Hall: Lifelong Learning at Work

Connecticut Housing Finance Authority

Management Innovation: Human Resources

HFA Staff Contact

Marcus Smith

marcus.smith@chfa.org

Study Hall: Education & Engagement

Overview

In the wake of the events of 2020, employees at CHFA faced a number of challenges and changes. Hybrid work brought flexibility, but also less opportunity for building connections with colleagues. In employee surveys and focus groups throughout 2022 and early 2023, we heard that formal settings for collaborating and sharing knowledge about our work had all but fallen away. Many employees expressed the feeling that silos across departments made them feel isolated in their work and that they did not understand the true impact of our work on affordable housing in the state. Simultaneously, the affordable housing crisis in Connecticut has continued to grow and dominates much of the local and statewide news cycles. More people than ever are struggling to afford their homes. Enter: Study Hall.

In collaboration with CHFA's Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Committee, Study Hall was founded in Spring 2023 to promote continued education on topics related to the work we do at CHFA, while providing employees a structured opportunity to connect with their colleagues. Each month, Study Hall meets for one hour to explore books, academic research, news articles, podcasts, and videos on affordable housing and DEIB topics.

The Study Hall Model

Study Hall's founding principles are based in curiosity, empathy, learning and collaboration. The model is highly replicable by other HFA's requiring only time and commitment to execution.

In promoting this new initiative, a committee of staff members endeavored to invite staff to "come as they are". All that's required to attend is an interest in learning and engaging in open conversation with peers. This is a critical piece of the Study Hall model because CHFA staff is a diverse group of individuals with varying levels of education around affordable housing and DEIB concepts. For example, when discussing potential topics, one individual suggested we discuss the impact of the "LIHTC program". Another staff member replied "What is LIHTC?" demonstrating the need to not only more widely engage staff on CHFA's major programs, but also to create an environment where people feel comfortable asking questions.

In order to help foster this environment, Study Hall operates under a set of "rules of engagement" which include:

1. **Be Smarter than your phone:** Do your best to maintain focus and resist the ever present temptation to multitask.
2. **Questions, Questions, Questions:** It is true, there are no dumb questions. We don't promise to have all the answers, but we do hope to engage in good discussion. Please come prepared to discuss the material and to engage in thoughtful conversation.
3. **"I" Statements:** Please bring your opinions and questions to the group and share them as self-focused "I" statements. You don't have to speak for the multitudes, we are more interested in what you think right now. Be aware that others will be bringing their own opinions and questions and be open to the range of perspectives in the room. We will all work together to feel safe to express our opinions and listen as allies.
4. **Vegas Rules:** During these conversations, colleagues may share things that are personal or ask a question or make a statement that they would not want attached to their name outside this space.

Connecticut Housing Finance Authority
Study Hall: Lifelong Learning at Work
Management Innovation: Human Resources

Please remember, that what is said here stays here. With that in mind, consider also that what is learned here should leave here – please do share the knowledge and the message, but please not names.

5. **Share the Airtime:** If you are someone who enjoys jumping right into the conversation – please do! We just ask that you make an effort to be aware of the level of your participation – give some space for others to put their ideas out there once you’ve shared a few times. If you are someone who usually waits to share, go ahead and jump in. This is intended to be a space where we share ideas and learn and grow together.
6. **Reserve the right to change your mind:** Sometimes over the course of a conversation, we hear something that rings true or changes our stance on a topic. Changing your opinion can be a sign of learning and growth and it is alright to reconsider or even completely change your mind when you are presented with new or different information.
7. **Ouch/Oops:** Creating safe spaces for conversation also means making room for people to make mistakes. Sometimes this shows up in the language we use or the assumptions we make without even knowing it. If this happens during a Study Hour and someone says something that causes you to be uncomfortable, say “Ouch” out loud. We will let the person finish their thought, and then we will turn and address the “Ouch”. This is an opportunity to use our listening skills to understand what caused the “Ouch”.

These rules are gone over at the beginning of each Study Hall session which are held the first Wednesday of every month. Meetings are primarily held in-person for two reasons. First, staff have expressed that they feel more comfortable sharing personal experiences in an in person setting. Secondly, the in-person setting helps us to fulfill our commitment to be fully present in the room, engaging with the discussion, rather than distracted by emails, Teams chats, and our phones. Study Hall discussions are led by staff from a cross section of the organization, up and down the organizational chart. These leads help select content for the discussions and prepare guiding questions; although many times only one or two prompts are needed before the conversation takes on a life of its own. After each Study Hall, an online survey is sent to participants for feedback.

Study Hall Topics

Study Hall endeavors to explore a wide variety of topics related to affordable housing and diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging. Thus far we’ve explored the following topics. To explore the diversity of content, please click on the links below.

- April 2023: [Decommodification and Its Role in Advancing Housing Justice](#)
- May 2023: [The Danger of a Single Story](#)
- June 2023: [What is Redlining?](#) & [Redlining in America](#)
- July 2023: [Inclusive Leadership](#)
- August 2023: [Zoning & How Zoning Broke the American City](#)
- September 2023: [The Business Case for DEIB](#) & [Stop Making the Business Case for DEIB](#)
- October 2023: [The Low Income Housing Tax Credit](#)
- November: 2023: [Why Poverty Persists in America](#)
- February 2024 – April 2024: The Color of Law by Richard Rothstein
 - A six meeting series discussion of the book, the Color of Law. Books were provided to participants by CHFA.

Results & Impact

Study Hall sought to accomplish two main tasks. First, to provide a formal setting for staff to engage with their colleagues and second, to provide meaningful opportunities for learning about the very work that makes CHFA an important organization in our state. Both of these goals connect to those from our most recent Strategic Plan; primarily to create and sustain a workplace conducive to attracting and retaining a highly qualified and motivated staff, equipped with the tools and knowledge to work efficiently and promote excellence. A year after launching, we are excited to say that participation and feedback indicate that these goals are being accomplished. Overtime, we have grown staff participation as word of mouth, and promotion of Study Hall by Executive Leadership, has increased attendance (**Appendix A: Promotional Materials**). Our first Study Hall in April 2023 had just 10 attendees, or 8% of our staff, compared to a recent session in 2024 in which 47 staff members participated in our conversation, or 37% of our staff.

Feedback from staff gathered from post-session surveys has been overwhelmingly positive. 100% of staff responded that they would recommend Study Hall to their colleagues in seven different post-session surveys. When asked to rank the opportunity for open discussion during Study Hall, sessions received an overall score of 4.81 out of 5, with 5 being the most open. We have also used constructive feedback to improve the Study Hall experience. For example, we moved monthly meetings from Tuesdays to Wednesdays when staff indicated that Tuesday meetings were hard to make work with their hybrid schedules. When staff expressed the desire to spend more time talking about the impact of racial discrimination on housing, Study Hall launched a guided reading of the Color of Law (**Appendix B: Color of Law Series Content**).

Staff have provided testimonials as the value of their experiences with Study Hall. Additional comments and testimonials can be found in **Appendix C: Staff Testimonials**

“I started attending study hall because the talks there felt real and down-to-earth. People shared their genuine stories and personal experiences, which really opened my eyes to different perspectives. Just hearing what life is like for others and learning from their journeys has been invaluable not something you can get from my textbooks.”

“As someone whose work focuses on the internal side of CHFA and the CHFA employees I started attending Study Hall in the hopes to learn more about our programs, legislation around housing and the history behind why we have programs in place. The conversations have been incredibly eye-opening and have explored everything from the history behind programs and legislation, what CHFA and other housing agencies are currently doing to help provide housing across the nation and looking towards the future at what more can be done. To have a forum where employees feel safe to share their personal experiences and opinions has been incredible and to hear from people directly impacted by different programs, legislation and even discrimination has helped put our work into perspective. The Study Halls have become a top priority and a time that I truly value and can't miss. I leave feeling more motivated to help provide a safe and inclusive environment for our employees so they can feel supported and provide their best to the state of CT”

Study Hall is an innovative and replicable approach to employee engagement. It provides staff with the opportunity to connect personally and professionally around the issues our staff is working to address each day. Our work on Study Hall is a direct reflection of not only our strategic plan but of our values: communication, collaboration, and above all service to the communities we serve and are a part of.