

The Georgia Initiative for
Community Housing
**Georgia Department of Community Affairs/
Georgia Housing and Finance Authority**
Special Achievement

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Overview: What is GICH?

In 2004, the Georgia Department of Community Affairs (DCA), the University of Georgia (UGA), and the Georgia Municipal Association (GMA) created the Georgia Initiative for Community Housing, also known as GICH. GICH is a program where competitively selected communities learn about affordable housing. While in the program, communities receive education, technical assistance, and facilitation around affordable housing. They receive this twice a year at our fall and spring retreats. At these retreats, the communities get to hear speakers from the affordable housing world discuss topics, ranging from how to access state programs, how to address issues like heirs property or the influx of short-term rentals, how to build relationships with developers, how to combat housing opposition, and more. They also receive multiple sessions with their facilitators. GICH also provides a space for these communities to meet and learn from one another, sharing their keys to success and warning about their obstacles. In between retreats, the communities meet monthly to work towards their housing goals. At the end of their junior year, they must complete a housing plan that outlines their goals and action steps. GICH communities receive special benefits from DCA when applying for certain programs: two bonus points for the Community HOME Investment Program (CHIP), the ability to apply every year for Community Development Block Grants, and the ability to write a letter of support worth two points for a Housing Tax Credit application.

Each year we select five communities to participate, and the program lasts for three years, meaning that we have roughly fifteen communities in the program at any given time. Over the program's lifetime, we have had ninety-six communities become GICH communities. Upon graduation, they earn alumni status. Two years after graduating, they can become "certified alumni". This means that they have proven their team is still active. If they do this, their DCA benefits extend. We currently have forty-eight certified alumni.

As the program has grown, many of our alumni are ready to take further steps towards making dynamic changes to the housing landscape in their community. This is happening simultaneously with DCA's desire to find new ways to combine our programs to be more effective and streamlined. From this we created our new program, GICH Senior Year.

GICH Senior Year (GICH SY) was created to bring technical assistance from DCA and our partners. The program is helping the selected communities develop innovative, site-based projects that link multiple state programs together. Through a competitive process, we will select two alumni communities to participate. There are two primary components to the program: education/technical assistance and project development. When communities participate in GICH, they must travel to the retreats to receive the education. This normally means that the entire team cannot go. With GICH SY, we are bringing the education to them. Elected officials will be able to participate and we can inform policy makers about affordable housing. With project development, the communities proposed to us in their application a project they need assistance bringing to fruition. These range from helping housing authorities renovate properties, policy development, creative housing uses for unutilized land, renovations of low-income

homes, and other similar projects. With this program, we are working to breakdown barriers between our programs to be able to assist these communities develop these projects in exciting new ways. We hope they will serve as a model for ways we can innovate statewide.

Innovation:

GICH is a program unique to Georgia. What makes this program so exciting is the ability to bring together communities from across our state that care about housing in their communities and are trying to make their communities places where all can thrive. They get to learn about housing programs, hear from experts, and learn from other communities what is working for them. We average 250+ guests at our retreats, and that number grows each year when we add five new communities. All of the communities participating in the program present on their progress, and it is amazing watching the other participants get excited about how they could replicate those projects back home. It also gives DCA an audience of people eager to learn about our programs. For example, at our spring retreat in 2024, we did education about homelessness. Many of our communities did not realize that was an issue that effects rural communities. They were eager to learn about the resources we provide and how they can access them to make their communities better.

Now, with GICH SY, we are going to be able to take this to the next level. We have put together technical assistance panels for each community based on their needs. Much of the education they will receive will be the same for each group, but other portions will be tailored to their specific needs. For example, one of our communities is facing a growing homelessness problem. Both communities will receive homelessness education, but that community will receive deeper instructions about ways to help get the unhoused into better conditions. The other community is facing many properties blighted due to heirs' property issues. We are bringing in heirs property experts to educate their government on how to help their citizens address that issue.

Replicability:

GICH can be replicated by other states. The primary obstacle is getting your partners in place. GICH is run by a state agency (DCA), a university (UGA), and a professional organization (GMA). The program officially rests at UGA, where a professor in their housing school oversees the program and the curriculum. GMA helps organize the retreats and assists with fundraising. DCA provides the educational content and most of the facilitators, as well as overseeing the alumni program. All three groups are actively involved and help select the new class of communities each year. If other states can make a partnership happen, they could organize a similar program.

Response to State Housing Needs:

Georgia, like most states, is in a housing crisis. As an agency, we are responsible for helping local governments with affordable housing. A constant refrain we hear from our city and county governments is that they are not aware of the options available to them. They know housing is an issue but they do not know where to begin. GICH provides them with the knowledge of what housing issues our state is facing and gives them the education about how to make investments in their community through different state and federal programs. By the time they graduate from the program, these communities are armed not only with knowledge but also with special benefits for certain programs that make them

more competitive when applying. GICH communities are among the most active applicants for our programs across the state.

GICH SY is responding to another need. Now that these communities have been putting in work, they are ready to tackle larger projects. With this new program allowing us to work directly with communities on larger projects, DCA can cut through traditional program barriers for maximum effect.

Data: GICH By The Numbers

Since the program's inception, GICH has seen 96 communities participate. Of the three programs that GICH communities get special consideration in applications, we have seen significant usage. For the 9% Housing Tax Credit, over \$176 million has been spent in their communities on affordable multifamily housing units since 2012. For CHIP since 2012, communities have been awarded over \$60 million in affordable single family new construction and rehabilitation. For CDBG, communities have been awarded over \$190 million for housing and housing related infrastructure improvements. GICH communities are putting in work and making significant investments in providing their citizens with safe, clean, and inviting places to live.

Provides Benefits that Outweigh the Costs:

GICH is a relatively inexpensive program to run. The largest costs are the spring and fall retreats. Those are primarily covered by registration fees (\$125 per attendee). Conferences can be expensive to throw, especially as our number of attendees increases due to adding five communities each year. There is no doubt, however, that the benefits outweigh the costs. Last year alone, \$25 million was invested in GICH communities through LIHTC, CHIP, and CDBG. Outside of direct financial benefits, the educational benefits are incalculable. Many of our communities go on to create pro-housing policy changes, such as denser zoning and allowing multifamily. Others put on housing workshops to help their citizens learn what resources are available to them. Some communities conduct housing assessments that give them the data they need to make informed policy decisions. The benefit that GICH provides these communities cannot be understated.

