

Core Values to Strengthen Culture and the Employee Environment

At the Illinois Housing Development Authority (IHDA), fulfilling our mission to create and preserve affordable housing depends on more than technical expertise. It requires a strong, value-driven culture. Employees are central to this work, and fostering an environment where they feel supported, connected, and empowered is critical to long-term success. To advance this goal, IHDA formalized its Core Values - People, Teamwork, Equity & Inclusion, Innovation, and Respect - and committed to embedding each of them throughout the employee experience.

IHDA intentionally positioned Core Values as a human resources strategy to shape workplace culture, strengthen engagement, align behaviors across the organization, and enhance recruitment and retention. Today, IHDA's Core Values provide a shared framework for decision-making, collaboration, and accountability. They establish a foundation for leadership decisions along with clear expectations for how employees work together and contribute to IHDA's mission, helping to create an environment rooted in trust, inclusion, and shared purpose. Most importantly, IHDA is focused on ensuring these values are not simply communicated, but actively integrated.

Looking Back on the Process: Engaging Staff and Building Ownership

There are various studies and articles outlining why Core Values truly matter to a company's culture. Values go beyond a simple list of guiding principles; they need to authentically define how staff operate, behave, and interact on a day-to-day basis. As outlined in [Forbes](#), values also need to be supported by [accountability](#) mechanisms so they can be integrated into performance management systems.

Although IHDA had long operated with a strong sense of purpose, leadership recognized the value of formally defining Core Values for its current workforce of 342 and future employees. Leadership wanted to embark on the Core Values because IHDA had a management challenge of departments working in siloes. While the pandemic taught organizations to work effectively in remote and hybrid environments, the daily in-person interactions staff would get from walking the halls, stopping in the breakroom, or attending work events and in-person meetings were lost. Cross-department connections and interactions needed to be reignited. Establishing Core Values would be a way to do so while also unifying IHDA's 15 departments under a single code of values to guide their decision-making and operations.

An ad hoc, cross-agency committee of 18 employees, representing 15 unique departments and perspectives, was established to lead the process of defining the Core Values, ensuring the process was inclusive, grounded in employee input, and managed by IHDA's Special Advisor on Equity and Inclusion. Through in-person and hybrid "Ideas and Inspiration" workshops, staff participated in three structured discussions to identify the values that guide their work. These sessions encouraged open dialogue across roles and levels, including leadership participation. Nearly half of IHDA employees engaged in the process, demonstrating strong organizational involvement and "buy-in." The workshops also initiated the breakdown of IHDA's "siloed" environment because employees around the Authority once again got to talk to other colleagues, less about their daily tasks and more about work views and perspectives.

Insights from these workshops informed a staff-wide survey, which achieved a 60% response rate, double the typical participation level of previous employee engagement opportunities. Results were analyzed and refined into a final set of Core Values, formally adopted by leadership and the IHDA Board. This inclusive process built strong employee ownership and ensured the Core Values reflected authentic experiences, strengthening their relevance and long-term sustainability.

The Campaign

IHDA launched an internal campaign to introduce and reinforce the Core Values initiative, with executive leadership setting the tone for organization-wide adoption. The campaign kicked off with a video from IHDA's Executive Director and was unified through the hashtag **#BuildTogether**, which served as a visible and consistent reminder. It was integrated Authority-wide on screensavers, referenced in internal communications, and branded on office materials, reinforcing the message in employees' daily work. IHDA's Executive Director also began including the Core Values graphic as a header on her monthly leadership meeting agendas to highlight leadership's focus on the values. A dedicated intranet microsite further supported the campaign by providing employee-driven content focused on workplace values. Videos featuring IHDA staff giving their perspectives about Core Values helped translate this work into real workplace behaviors. These testimonials were promoted through IHDA's internal weekly newsletter.

Core Values in Action: Building Culture Through Everyday Practices

Following adoption, IHDA focused on integrating Core Values into the Authority's operations. IHDA's leadership now requires departments to devise at least two ways to implement the Core Values into their internal practices and procedures on an annual basis. IHDA's Special Advisor on Diversity & Inclusion ensures departments are accomplishing this by tracking these efforts, which further reduce the "siloes" nature of IHDA's departments by requiring them to use the same organizational standards to guide their independent operations. For example, IHDA's Operational Excellence Department incorporated the Core Values into its Monday.com digital board for managing the department's tasks (**Exhibit A**). The department attributes a different Core Value to each task, tying the department's individual operations directly into the Authority's broader culture and unifying the department with the rest of the organization. In addition, leadership modeled its FY26 goals on the Core Values (**see Exhibit B**).

In addition, in June 2025, the HR Department integrated the Core Values into IHDA's Employee Recognition Program (ERP), allowing staff to recognize their co-workers for reflecting the Values through their work. Since this addition, employees have submitted a total of 366 Core Values recognitions celebrating their co-workers, more acknowledgements than there are IHDA employees, which demonstrates continued, high employee engagement with the Core Values.

Integrating Core Values into Hiring and Performance Management

Core Values proved to be innovative from a human resources perspective because the Values changed IHDA's appeal to potential new employees, such as Millennial and Gen Z employees who strongly prefer a values-first workplace. While IHDA has always focused on helping Illinoisans obtain and maintain affordable housing, prior to the Core Values, IHDA's branding reflected that of a typical Housing Finance Agency: a banking entity that executes "behind-the-scenes" financing work. IHDA's Core Values reinforced IHDA's mission-driven work and now help to promote IHDA as a change agent with a positive, embedded culture to prospective employees looking for values-first and mission-driven work. Nowhere is this more evident than in IHDA's trips to career fairs, where the Authority brings Core Values-branded merchandise to connect prospective employees with IHDA's culture and mission.

To bring job seekers from candidate to employee, Core Values are now also a defined component of IHDA's hiring process. Candidates are evaluated not only on technical qualifications, but also on their demonstrated alignment with IHDA's values. The Human Resources Department provides questions to interviewers to help assess how candidates have exhibited collaboration, respect, innovation, and inclusivity in prior roles. This approach ensures that new hires are not only capable of performing the job but are also well-positioned to contribute positively to IHDA's culture from their first day.

In addition, Core Values are introduced early in onboarding. On orientation day for new employees, HR gives an orientation presentation that includes the Core Values, and each new hire receives a copy of the Core Values, reinforcing expectations and helping new employees understand how success is defined within the organization. This early integration supports faster cultural alignment and strengthens employee engagement from the outset.

Also, for IHDA's annual performance evaluations, every employee is asked about Core Values in their work and how they best reflect that value. It creates a structured opportunity for staff to reflect on how they demonstrate Core Values in their work, identify areas for growth, and align their development goals with organizational expectations. This integration strengthens the employee environment by creating clarity and fairness in how performance is evaluated, while reinforcing a culture where values guide both individual and organizational success.

Expanding Recognition and Sustaining Engagement

In August 2025, leadership introduced the "Core Values in Action" Award (**Exhibit C**), an honor given annually to one IHDA employee whose work and professional interactions embody the Core Values. The award-nomination process is rooted in employee engagement, as employees must nominate their peers for the award and describe why they represent the Core Values for committee review. For the first "Core Values in Action" Award, employees nominated 13 of their peers from five departments, demonstrating engagement from across the organization.

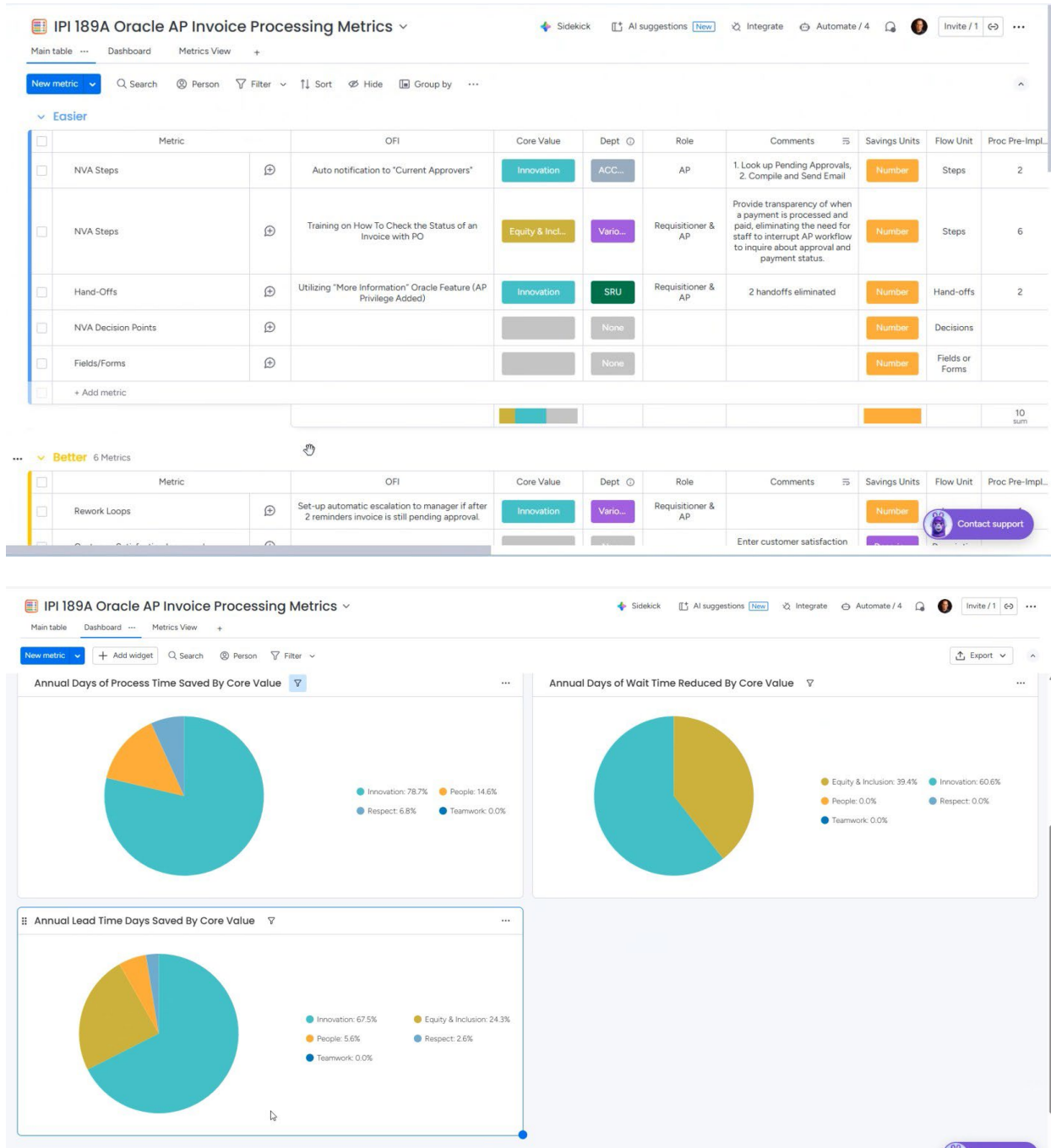
Also, building on the Core Values of People, Teamwork, and Innovation, in 2026, IHDA launched the internal Speaker Series called "IHDA In Action." The program highlights how IHDA's many homeownership, multifamily lending, community revitalization, and other programs affect Illinoisans in uplifting and even life-changing ways through conversations with a guest speaker. The first guest was Andre Ruddock who visited the Authority to discuss his experiences with IHDA's [Rental Housing Support \(RHS\) Re-Entry Program](#). Ruddock talked about how the program enabled him to receive his first home, reacclimate to society, and dedicate his life and career to fair housing justice following his incarceration. These simple but impactful recognitions and events serve as a reminder that Core Values are engrained into the employee environment and influence employees' work that drives results outside of IHDA.

Conclusion

IHDA's Core Values initiative has strengthened engagement, improved collaboration, and enhanced the workplace environment. Employees have a clearer understanding of expectations and feel more connected to both their colleagues and the organization's mission. The model is intentionally simple and adaptable. By focusing on consistent communication, employee participation, and integration into human resources practices, IHDA has created a sustainable approach that can be replicated across departments and by other organizations seeking to strengthen culture.

*Illinois Housing Development Authority
Innovative at the Core: Redefining Organizational Culture through the Core Values Initiative
Management Innovation – Human Resources*

Exhibit A



IHDA's Operational Excellence (OpEx) Department incorporated the Core Values into its Monday.com digital board for managing and assigning tasks.

Exhibit B

IHDA ORGANIZATIONAL GOALS
FOR FISCAL YEAR 2026



This document highlights IHDA's FY26 Leadership Goals and the corresponding priorities and projects. This is not inclusive of individual department FY26 Goals.



(See second chart on next page.)

Exhibit B (Continued)

IHDA ORGANIZATIONAL GOALS FOR FISCAL YEAR 2026

 Optimize Our Legislative Agenda and Partnerships to Secure Additional Resources	• Advocate for the extension of the Donation Tax Credit • Expand Strategic Partnerships specifically with FHLB, Ginnie Mae, and the philanthropic and banking communities • Advocate for the extension of the Annual Comprehensive Housing Plan Act • Initiate the establishment of the State Housing Appeals Board to strengthen the Affordable Housing Planning and Appeal Act (AHPAA) • Eliminate at least two governmental barriers to affordable housing production
 Increase Affordable Rental Housing Through Innovative Solutions	• Maintain and expand IHDA's participation in the State's permanent supportive housing goals: 300 units • Submit through the procurement process the new ILHousingSearch.org website RFP • Develop one new financial product for developers to increase affordable rental inventory • Plan, research, facilitate, and create the 2027-2028 Qualified Allocation Plan • Launch Preservation 2.0 Grant Program • Establish a working group to develop recommendations to reduce barriers to entry for permanent supportive housing with emphasis on the re-entry population
 Create Homeownership Opportunities and Enhance Resources to Preserve Existing Homes	• Assist 5,000 homebuyers in FY26 with purchasing a home • Explore and identify opportunities to expand access to manufactured housing • Design and roll out a program promoting the new construction of single-family homes • Help 285 homeowners with repairs and 4,950 prospective homeowners with counseling • Facilitate IHDA's engagement in the development of housing cooperatives and its support of share loan lending
 Cultivate Equitable, Inclusive, and Engaged Collaborations, Internally & Externally	• Redesign and launch IHDA.org and IHDAMortgage.org • Conscious approach to integrating Core Values and our inclusive work environment in new IHDA.org content and "About Us" section • Create a successful strategy to broaden external communications around IHDA stories • Develop a "Downstate Playbook" to offer technical assistance to underserved rural and small metro markets across the state to improve access to IHDA resources • Secure Mansfield certification for our Legal Department • Adopt DISC as a key tool to foster teamwork and professional growth and implement within four IHDA departments • Launch the bi-annual all-staff Core Values recognition process
 Increase the Efficiency and Resiliency of IHDA's Business Processes	• Complete procurement of a new HRIS to replace ADP • Complete Copilot Pilot and Recommend Path to Deployment • Develop RFP for Development Lifecycle Software Procurement • Rebuild CBRAP with New Vendors, Systems, and Administrative Rules • Optimize the down payment assistance process in partnership with US Bank to reduce costs and improve staff efficiency

IHDA Fiscal Year 2026 goals incorporate Core Values.

Exhibit C



Amber Lockwood, Assistant Director of IHDA's Homeownership Programs, receives the "Core Values in Action" Award from Tiffany Davis, Special Advisor on Equity and Inclusion, during a meeting of the IHDA Board.