

IHDA Connect

Illinois Housing Development Authority

Management Innovation: Technology

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The Challenge and the IHDA Connect Solution

The Illinois Housing Development Authority (IHDA) has evolved significantly from its early days of using floppy disks and overstuffed file folders to manage the annual deluge of Multifamily applications. As IHDA matured, it transitioned to using USB thumb drives and email, enhancing the speed of information processing, though not always with optimal efficiency. The proliferation of email not only complicated communication with an influx of application adjustments but also preserved a segment of users persisting with paper submissions, resisting the digital shift. This digital transition mirrored IHDA's own growth and the corresponding increase in email volume, often to the frustration of business partners and our external users and partners.

Transforming Affordable Housing Funding Processes

Historically, IHDA employees managed application submissions through cumbersome emails, physical boxes of paper, and digital storage devices, culminating in frantic, last-minute drop-offs at the submission deadline. The application review process suffered from significant bottlenecks due to the absence of a centralized platform for document collaboration, necessitating internal distribution for review which led to inefficiencies and delays.

In response, IHDA spearheaded and developed the IHDA Connect portal, a comprehensive end-to-end software solution designed and built in-house in collaboration with our Multifamily, Strategic Planning and Research, Legal, Asset Management, and IT departments. This cutting-edge portal has revolutionized how internal operations and technology converge to streamline the funding application process for affordable housing programs. IHDA Connect stands as a beacon of management innovation, addressing critical challenges and delivering substantial benefits to both internal users and external development teams.

This portal was meticulously crafted to address these challenges with several innovative features:

- **Real-time document submission visibility** from external development teams.
- **Enhanced document workflow** and notification systems.
- **A document master list** that categorizes each document by title, stage, and owner role within IHDA.
- **A comprehensive reporting dashboard and BI capabilities** for monitoring all development deals.
- **A long-term application management tool** to streamline processes.
- **Robust, secure external user management** capabilities.
- **Reduced time and improved quality** for Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests.

Innovation Through In-House Development

Faced with the limitations of off-the-shelf solutions, which were either overly simplistic or too complex for IHDA's needs, and the high costs, time commitments and procurement complexities associated with third-party software development teams, IHDA leveraged its internal IT application development team. This team developed a tailored web application using SharePoint as the backend and a custom developed front end, simplifying document management and incorporating features specifically designed to meet the multifaceted requirements of the Multifamily application process.

Our software developers and business analysts collaborated closely, conducting pilot trials and employing agile methodologies to rapidly deliver new functionalities that bespoke products could not offer.

Empowering Internal Users

For IHDA staff, IHDA Connect represents a paradigm shift in document management and workflow efficiency. Previously confined to restricted network drives, documents and data related to funding applications are now democratized, readily accessible for review. This accessibility not only saves time but also enhances collaboration and decision-making processes within IHDA.

Moreover, IHDA Connect provides invaluable business intelligence capabilities. It efficiently manages workflow pipelines, offering real-time insights into the status of development proposals within the funding process. This transparency enables IHDA staff to monitor uploads, provide technical assistance promptly, and assign specific tasks related to funding applications and document groups. The auto-indexing feature, powered by tagging, allows for seamless document filtering based on category, phase, and document name, enhancing organization and retrieval efficiency.

Integration with Microsoft platforms, particularly SharePoint, forms the backbone of IHDA Connect's seamless operation. This integration facilitates the creation of dynamic applications tailored to manage new program compliance, ensuring scalability across IHDA's operations. Additionally, IHDA Connect's ability to accept large documents up to 500 MB, a feat not always easily achievable through conventional email systems like Outlook, adds a layer of security through document scanning for corruption and viruses.

The portal also offers robust project management capabilities, delivering notifications of key milestones to internal staff and facilitating efficient error resolution, compliance monitoring, and business forecasting through SQL Server integrations. Notably, IHDA Connect significantly reduces lead time for Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, automating document packaging and delivery to requestors—a marked improvement over manual file-by-file compilation from network drives.

Enhancing External Development Team Experience

External development teams, crucial partners in IHDA's mission, benefit immensely from IHDA Connect's user-centric design and functionality. A personalized login provides access to all active funding applications, offering a comprehensive view of assigned tasks and their status in the review process. This streamlined interface improves user experience and operational efficiency for external teams, including primary sponsors, general contractors, architects, and others involved in the application process.

The co-working capabilities within IHDA Connect further enhance collaboration among external team members, facilitating seamless communication and task coordination. The upload center, characterized by stability and security, empowers external teams with clear direction through links to help topics, required documents, and application compliance guidelines. Notably, external teams can self-manage uploads, rectifying errors and replacing erroneous submissions—a feature that significantly reduces administrative burden and enhances data accuracy.

Automatic communication of key milestones, such as successful submission, via email addresses a longstanding request from external development teams, providing them with submission receipts and ensuring transparency throughout the application process.

Results and Achievements

The IHDA Connect system revolutionized how IHDA handles its wide array of Multifamily program offerings. By transitioning to a dynamic document upload center and utilizing document staging, IHDA Connect significantly reduced the redundancies and inefficiencies previously plaguing the internal review process. The current database is storing more than 345 gigabytes of documents, which in addition to saving a lot of trees, will help operations at IHDA in cross-department management this data. This enhancement not only saved time but also improved the overall quality of our program delivery to business partners.

Benefits

- **Automated project intake** and self-service account management for external teams.
- **Improved document collaboration processes**, including enhanced status tracking and alerts.
- **Centralized document repository** for all project stages, from Preliminary Project Assessment to Full Application and Closing.
- **Simplified user interface** for both external and internal stakeholders to manage the project's entire lifecycle.
- **Future-ready plan** for PID storage, transitioning from network drives to a centralized document repository, ensuring easier access and management.

In summary, IHDA Connect represents a pinnacle of management innovation, transforming the landscape of affordable housing funding processes. By bridging technology with internal operations, IHDA has created a platform that not only enhances efficiency and transparency within the organization but also empowers external partners, ultimately advancing the mission of providing accessible and quality housing solutions to communities in need. This comprehensive overhaul of IHDA's document management and application process not only streamlined operations but also enhanced collaboration and communication across all stages of multifamily development, setting a new standard in housing authority management. IHDA Connect stands as a testament to the power of innovative management practices in driving positive change and fostering collaboration across stakeholders in the affordable housing ecosystem.