

Elevating Asset Management & Enhancing Manager Engagement

Illinois Housing Development Authority
Rental Housing: Multifamily Management

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Background

Historically, training and professional development opportunities for owner and managers of Illinois Housing Development Authority (IHDA) assisted multifamily rental developments were limited in terms of both offerings and access opportunities. Handled by an array of staff as time and capacity permitted, the result was an inconsistent and often ad hoc approach to providing our partners with the tools and documents they need to meet their compliance requirements. With responsibility for the compliance and operations of a portfolio of 1,300 properties and 131,000 affordable units across the state, IHDA recognized the need for a structured educational program, and radically redesigned its approach to foster increased expertise, capacity and engagement among our owner and manager stakeholders.

Program Development

A dedicated full-time Training Specialist position was created to focus on development and implementation of training through direct delivery as well as coordination with other providers. This position resides on a cross-functional team in IHDA's Asset Management department focused on policy, strategy and analytics.

In addition, a formal survey was created and conducted for the first time to gauge owner/manager training needs as it related to both content and format. Respondents indicated strong preferences for training focused on regulatory requirements by funding source and program, as well as IHDA-specific policies and practices. Additionally, survey results highlighted a need for expanded classroom offerings as well as webinars. This critical feedback directly informed the resulting training plan and pursuit of related technical resources.

Modernizing Asset Management Compliance

A full-year training schedule was developed and implemented in 2018 that emphasized the high priority topics highlighted in the survey results. IHDA's Asset Management staff offer these training sessions in a combination of classroom and webinar settings, with options and registration instructions communicated through visually appealing and branded Constant Contact email blast templates rather than static management bulletins. This outreach is done under a coordinated communications strategy to all owner/agent contacts on file per development as well as other relevant industry stakeholders. To facilitate payment and ease of use, IHDA transitioned from only accepting registration payments by physical check to PayPal and credit card submission. Registration costs were also revisited and rightsized with the introduction of group rates to further incentivize participation. Webinar capacity was increased from 99 to 500 participants per session through WebEx, and a uniform and modern presentation format that combined narrative and visual elements was developed and deployed.

Together, these program enhancements not only allow for targeted instruction, but also encourage broader participation as the time and travel costs for downstate owners and managers had previously been a barrier. Three classroom and six webinars were offered in 2018 including presentations on Low-Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC), the HOME Investment Partnerships Program (HOME), fair housing, financial administration and rental compliance. Registration for each course sold out. Notably, since the Training Specialist is also responsible for internal IHDA Asset Management training, the content targeted to both internal Asset Management staff and their external colleagues was appropriately aligned.

Fostering New Partnerships

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Building on the success of this revitalized training program, IHDA's Asset Management department sponsored a Workshop with targeted content for owners and managers before the start of the Authority's Annual Conference in 2018. The Annual Conference, which historically targeted stakeholders focused on front-end development, provided a unique opportunity for developers, lending institutions, owners and managers to break out of their silos to share information and work collaboratively on issues that require multiple perspectives to address. Discounted admission to the broader conference was offered to pre-conference workshop registrants in order to provide them access to additional informational resources and facilitate networking opportunities between stakeholders in different phases of the affordable housing lifecycle. A session focused on advancements in IHDA's Asset Management department kicked off the day followed by several different tracks that owners and managers could select from: Compliance Essentials for LIHTC, HOME, Housing Trust Fund or RAF Compliance; Compliance Hot Topics Q/A; and Property Manager Best Practices Peer showcase. Registration was sold out weeks in advance and each session accommodated approximately 120 participants.

Positive feedback was received in subsequent attendee surveys, indicating strong interest generated by both the 2018 training series and the pre-conference workshop. Building on this momentum, the training program expanded further in 2019 to include a larger number of trainings (2 per month) and additional topics including projects with blended financing, rental assistance, income and assets verification, and fair housing for maintenance staff.

Additionally, given the high interest, strong attendance and positive feedback from the prior year, a new conference track was developed specific to Asset Management for IHDA's annual conference. Owner and manager registrants could now access a full-range of conference activities including the opening plenary, keynote, luncheon, reception, and industry expo while interfacing with other industry leaders including policymakers, planners, developers, investors, syndicators and service providers. The Asset Management conference track consisted of three sessions:

Modernizing Asset Management – targeted to those uncertain of compliance requirements or points of contact. This session included an overview of departmental structure and priorities and spotlighted key policy, strategy, technology, communications initiatives and process improvements including enhanced point of contact lookup, the annual compliance package which outlines status and upcoming requirements/deadlines, and a portfolio-wide report on operating expenses highlighting trends by geography, housing type, population served, and expense type.

Smart Starts: Focus on Initial Occupancy – geared to developers and owner/managers planning or actively working on a multifamily rental development and concerned about lease-up, or those in need of assistance navigating the various steps between tenant selection planning and occupancy achievement. This session shared best practices from peer leaders related to moving from closing to initial occupancy and how to position the property early for long-term success. Local and national properties were spotlighted which served families, seniors, and special needs populations and involved an array of public/private partnerships.

Demystifying Rental Assistance: targeted to a broad audience who is unfamiliar with the array of Federal, State and local rental assistance programs. This session offered an overview of distinct rental assistance programs including their respective purpose, scope, and scale as well as a spotlight of options

for related access/utilization by leaders in public housing, social services, homeless services, rural development, and at IHDA and HUD. A one-page summary of the rental assistance landscape in Illinois was also disseminated.

Registration for the overall conference as well as the specific Asset Management session was very robust and each room largely filled to capacity. All three sessions were structured to be informative and interactive. A live audience polling feature, using PollEv, was deployed to obtain real-time input on needs and priorities.

Achieving Strategic Objectives

The aforementioned training and professional development initiatives are innovative, as there are limited such initiatives at a national and state level that target owners/managers resulting in a significant resource gap. Related training and conference topics are trendy and timely.

These initiatives can be replicated by Housing Finance Agencies across the country who can adapt related approaches with their stakeholders given the apparent high demand. IHDA is already speaking with local funders including City of Chicago and Cook County about potential collaborations in this area.

Elevating manager trainings also provides benefits to HFA customers in response to a growing state need. Once an affordable multifamily rental property is constructed with IHDA resources, IHDA's Asset Management department oversees related compliance for up to 40 years to ensure the long-term financial, physical, and operational viability of the property for the benefit of its residents and surrounding community. Providing owners/managers with targeted training and professional development enhances their capacity to successfully operate the related properties and ensure they remain decent, safe, and affordable. It also ensures that IHDA's initial investment remains sound and informs future funding decisions

While training and professional development required an investment in staff time and technical resources, it is already yielding positive returns in the form of increased participation and enhanced owner/manager understanding of related requirements (which over time can improve compliance). Utilizing a limited number of staff and existing or low-cost technical resources, IHDA was able to significantly grow its training program and engage in new meaningful ways with its owners/managers. This engagement further strengthened partnerships with owners and managers as training participants and conference speakers, other training providers, and with the front-end development community who attend IHDA's Annual Conference.

Finally, these efforts help IHDA to achieve its strategic goals. This work aligns with IHDA's Asset Management focus on stakeholder engagement, process improvement, communications modernization, and technological transformation. By enhancing trainings and professional development opportunities, IHDA heightened the visibility of the asset management profession, built expertise and capacity, improved compliance, facilitated peer-to-peer knowledge transfer, and forged stronger connections between IHDA and its stakeholders.