

Annual Funding Announcement

Minnesota Housing

Communications: Special Event Marketing

HFA Staff Contact

Josh Nguyen

josh.nguyen@state.mn.us

Overview

On November 21, Minnesota Housing announced [\\$254 million in funding to create and preserve more than 2,665 homes](#) throughout the state, including rental units and single-family homes. The announcement outlined funding for 74 housing developments. These developments will support more than 5,025 jobs and will leverage additional private and local resources for more than \$572 million in total costs.

Communicating the impact of numbers like these can be challenging. For years, our annual funding announcement has felt similar to a traditional grand opening where public officials follow each other up to the podium. This year, we moved away from that model. Instead, we turned to a conversation-based event to communicate the impact of our work.

In this submission, we'll show how other HFA's can replicate this cost-effective approach to engage, educate, and inspire more people to further our mission; Housing is the foundation for success, so we collaborate with individuals, communities and partners to create, preserve and finance housing that is affordable.

Innovative & Replicable

Our 2019 RFP event added three new components; a round table discussion with Governor Tim Walz, a video preview of funding selections, and a photo gallery featuring those most impacted.

1. **Roundtable Discussion with Governor Walz** – Over the past year, Gov. Walz has created more support and visibility to the need for housing and to our agency. To capitalize on the new exposure, we began experimenting with new ways to share our story and engage broader audiences. One example of that is recreating our public meetings with the governor as listening sessions. Instead of him leading the conversations, we encourage community members most impacted to share their challenges around finding housing that is affordable. For the 2019 RFP, we invited three members of the Sabathani Community Center, the housing director for the Lower Sioux Indian Community, and three new homeowners from that community. This gave the event a personal touch that our events were lacking in the past. From seniors being forced out of their communities to young families' inability to buy homes on or near tribes, this provided a true portrait into the housing crisis in our state. No elected official, nonprofit leader, or partner could provide that level of perspective.

"Your housing loan program has really given us an opportunity to start a family," said Stephen Davis, as he held his young son, Stephen Jr., at the event. "It's really been a blessing, it really has. Thank you."

2. **Photo Gallery** – To continue on that thread, we wanted to share as many impact stories as possible. Leading up to the event, our staff interviewed and photographed several families and individuals about the barriers they face in finding housing that is affordable. We collected eight photos and accompanying quotes, combining this content into a storytelling photo gallery. We printed and displayed these powerful stories at the event. This provided an intimate touch and put faces to the struggle of finding housing in Minnesota. *See Figure 1 below for an example.*

3. **Video Preview** – Another way we expanded the reach of our event was to produce a [video to recap our funding selections](#). This was showcased at our board presentation and distributed after the event.

A conversation focused event can be a powerful tool for any HFA. As our organizations has learned over the past year, creating a compelling event doesn't need to be expensive. No matter the size of your budget, there are accessible tools for increasing engagement and awareness.

- **Put People First** – Fight the urge to have too many partners or elected officials on stage. Our organization won't host an event unless there is someone with lived-experience involved in the program. This expectation can present and challenge and may increase planning work. However, we've found that this can attract increased media coverage, as real people provide better news stories than units or dollar amounts. For our events, we often put the leading official on stage with those impacted, framing it as a listening session. The person impacted represents many other Minnesotans when they share their experience with housing instability.
- **Faces over Finances** – This is one of the easiest ways for organizations to show the impact of projects they've funded. People are the reason we do this. Displaying a portrait with a quote is an extremely effective way to communicate the impact stable housing can have on a person or family. Easy way to save – instead of printing photos, utilize a monitor or tv to display a slide show. Another way to accomplish this is to produce a video previewing these announcements.
- **Make it "Media Friendly"** – Getting media to cover funding announcements can be a constant struggle for any HFA. One reason for our recent success with increased media coverage is we make it as easy as possible for journalists to interact with us. With such tight deadlines, this makes it more likely that they can attend our events. For our RFP event, we made sure people with lived experience and officials were available before and after the event for interviews with media. We also provided a [fact sheet with digestible facts and figures](#) about the state's housing stock. Additionally, we installed an audio system in the venue to ensure news entities can record the meeting with clean audio. This may seem small, but each news crew that has covered our events has thanked us for this feature.

Engage Targeted Audiences & Achieving Measurable Results

The ability to announce our organization's upcoming projects in communities across the state is essential. It's important that we're able to relay this information to both the public and to the legislators who are hearing about housing challenges in their district.

- **Reaching Elected Officials** – Minnesota Housing's RFP event enhances how we deliver information to legislators by providing a different way to communicate how we serve people. These are complex topics and programs, and the understanding of their impact can easily get lost in spreadsheets. The opportunity for legislators to see that our programs reach people in their districts helps them make more informed decisions about how scarce resources should be

used. Thanks to our increased media awareness and a growing public interest in housing, we, along with Gov. Walz requested the largest financial ask in state's history for bonding.

- **Increasing Public Awareness** – A successful working relationship with the media is our most effective tool in reaching people around the state. As we've pivoted to more engaging events, our organization has seen our coverage grow. For the 2019 RFP event, we earned media coverage in all seven regions around the state. This amount of coverage is priceless. [Duluth](#) | [Twin Cities](#) | [Mankato](#) | [Grand Rapids](#) | [Rochester](#) | [Metro Suburbs](#)

Provide benefits that outweigh costs & Demonstrate effective use of resources

- **Engage staff with unique skills** – Minnesota Housing's communications department is small but mighty, we often we need to get creative to serve our state. For our RFP event, we brought on staff members that don't usually work in the communication department. The portrait photographer, Becca Faircloth, works in our compliance department. Lucky for us, she is a skilled photographer and saved the agency thousands of dollars by gathering and editing the photos. Several other staff from around the agency also chipped in and provided on-site support for the event, like setup and cleaning. Without the help of these flexible staff members, the event would have cost much more.
- **Reuse and recycle** – All of the photos and videos gathered at the event will eventually be reused for other content. For instance, when we presented during the legislative session in early February, we used the same photos and videos to convey the impact stable housing can have on families and individuals. Additionally, this helps grow our media library for other content in the future.

Achieve strategic objectives

- Everything we do at our agency must further one of our strategic goals; *Improve the Housing System, Preserve and Create Housing Opportunities, Make Homeownership More Accessible, Support People Needing Services, and Strengthen Communities*. Our 2019 RFP event was the culmination of all of those. Hearing the stories of those impacted, sharing how we address needs, and showing the results of our efforts is the goal of the event. We're proud to say we believe we accomplished that.

Media



Figure 1 - Photo of mother and son used in the RFP Photo gallery. It highlights the importance of stable housing for their family.



Figure 2 - Cover of the 2019 Funding Selections. Guide offers regional breakdowns of properties and funding elements of projects.

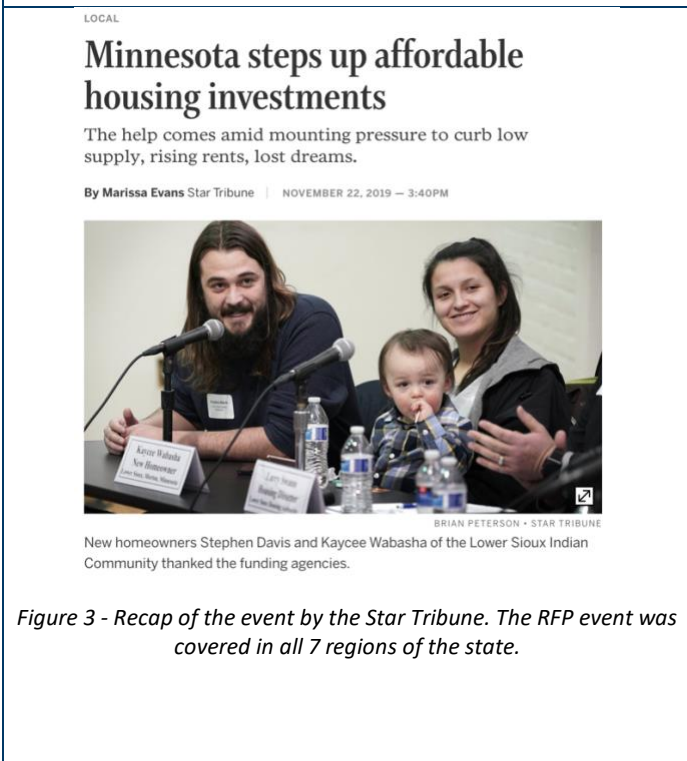


Figure 3 - Recap of the event by the Star Tribune. The RFP event was covered in all 7 regions of the state.



Figure 4 - Gov. Walz and Commissioner Ho listen to community members at Sabathani about housing challenges.