

Where We Live: Minnesota Housing Celebrates 50 Years

Minnesota Housing
Communications: Special Event Marketing

HFA Staff Contact
Anbar Ahmed
anbar.ahmed@state.mn.us

When we set out to commemorate Minnesota Housing's 50th anniversary, we knew there was one thing we absolutely had to do: Get the agency's founder and visionary, James Solem, on tape. A thoughtful and articulate leader, Jim Solem was the one who first made the case to the legislature that the state needed a housing finance agency.

Our film editor pieced the segment together this way: Commissioner Jennifer Ho says, "I think it's important to know where you come from."

In the next shot we see 84-year-old Jim Solem sitting at our current office, reading the original charter he helped author upon the agency's founding: "Minnesota has a housing crisis. It is a crisis even more severe for minority families excluded from decent housing because of race as well as income. It is a crisis for the middle-income family unable to meet housing needs." He looks up at the camera and reflects, "It's today's mission, written in 1971."

Through careful editing, the filmmakers effectively captured the spirit of the individual who set the work of the agency into motion. And while many housing finance agencies were started around the same time, each state has its own unique origin story, and Minnesota's is intricately bound with Jim Solem.

This scene figures in the opening moments of ["Where We Live: Minnesota Housing Celebrates 50 Years,"](#) a 50-minute documentary about the past, present and future of the agency.

In the film we make sure to capture not just the founder but all the agency's commissioners, placing them in the chapters where their signature work best fits the content, from the agency's first investments in supportive housing to its innovations in multifamily financing.

The film includes several current assistant commissioners who dig deeper into the current work of the agency, such as in expanding the agency's work in downpayment assistance. To show the leadership, culture and vision of the agency we are today, we have reflections from current Commissioner Jennifer Ho interspersed throughout the film.

But the beauty of the film is that it does not lean entirely on agency leadership to describe the impact of Minnesota Housing's work on people's lives. Instead, it invites renters and homebuyers to tell their own stories, in their own words. The majority of the film relies on the stories of the individuals who live in housing financed by the agency. Some are captured on their move-in day, sharing their hopes for the future while surrounded by the boxes and bags they've brought from their last housing situation – in some cases, a stretch of homelessness.

Our strategic objectives in creating the film were manifold: To introduce viewers to the full breadth of the work of the agency, to provide an opportunity for recognition and celebration of the work achieved over five decades, to build morale across a staff scattered by telework due

to the pandemic, and to produce a professional communications tool that would last for years to come.

We were able to achieve each of these objectives in the following ways:

- Explain the work of the agency: The seven chapters cover the agency's inception, preventing and ending homelessness, creating rental housing, encouraging homeownership, cooperative ownership of manufactured home communities, working to dismantle racist practices in the housing industry, and a look ahead at what challenges the agency can anticipate. The individual chapters are 6-8 minutes long and can be viewed as individual segments or as part of the whole film. In this way we have brief content as well as long format presentation for use with various audiences.
- Provide an opportunity to celebrate 50 years: The film lent itself naturally to an event to show the film. We held one event for staff at the office, and one for agency partners in a neighborhood cinema. Each of these 50th anniversary events had a natural program built in; a brief introduction by Commissioner Ho was all that was needed, as the film spoke for itself. The second event was for agency partners, like developers, funders and nonprofit grantees. Bringing partners together fostered the shared sense of accomplishment of what our collective work creates in the community.
- Built staff morale: Morale may have never mattered more than during the pandemic, when staff felt the pressure of creating massive emergency programs just when we were scattered to hastily constructed home offices. At our staff celebration, team members could be heard cheering when accomplishments were mentioned, such as reaching 40% of homebuyer loans going to people of color. In some moments staff members could be seen wiping away a tear. The music, the imagery and the personal impact stories helped everyone gathered see our shared mission brought to life on the screen. It was powerful and moving.
- Professional communications tool: The film is highly effective educational piece that explains what we do, how we do it and who we serve. The material is timeless and will live on for years. It can also be parlayed into a public television piece by removing the emphasis on the agency's accomplishments and expanding the focus on people with lived experience of achieving housing stability and homeownership, an opportunity we are currently exploring.

Creating a film to commemorate an agency anniversary or other significant accomplishment is a project any agency can undertake. Skilled video producers and visual storytellers can be found in every region and, if our experience is any indication, is an engaging and meaningful project for the firm selected. Creating a film does require a commitment of funds to secure a professional team, but we found the cost reasonable at an average of \$1,600/minute.

We view the project to be an effective use of resources because the film's subject matter is perennial and will serve the agency well for years to come. And creating a film doesn't create more "stuff" to store – it's digital, the quality won't fade, and it won't collect dust or have to be thrown away.

Knowing that the content can be reassembled into a piece for a broader viewing audience makes it a good investment for potential future distribution.

For now, the film is something that could suit any agency audience, such as legislators considering allocating more funds to the agency, private investors, potential job applicants, and other government or industry peers that seek to understand how Minnesota Housing fulfills its mission.

We surveyed viewers about who they thought could benefit from seeing the film. Minnesota's State Auditor told us the film should be required viewing by all members of the state legislature. Several other respondents suggested the same. Others called out philanthropic leaders, chambers of commerce, the Metropolitan Council (the Twin Cities regional planning agency) and leaders of social service organizations. And several people commented simply that "everyone" would benefit from seeing it.

"Where We Live" is a signature piece for the agency that puts the heart in our work in a way that dollars and units never could.

Watch "Where We Live" on our website at <https://www.mnhousing.gov/where-we-live.html>.
[Watch the complete film on YouTube.](#)

Visual Aids





WHERE WE LIVE



"Where We Live" honors the evolution of Minnesota Housing over five decades.

The documentary highlights the inception of the Agency, the evolution of its programs and the people it serves.

Hear from residents whose lives unfold in homes supported by Minnesota Housing.

PRODUCED BY SEAVERT STUDIOS



Scan the QR code to access the film online.



mn MINNESOTA
HOUSING
CELEBRATING 50 YEARS

mnhousing.gov