

People Up Front: Housing Announcements That Center Storytelling and Impact

Minnesota Housing

Communications: Special Event Marketing

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Introduction

In 2024, Minnesota Housing reimagined its annual funding announcement as a cinematic, story-forward campaign that centered the voices of those most impacted by housing instability. Guided by the equity-based narrative strategies of Dr. Tiffany Manuel, we built a communications playbook that combined emotional storytelling, strategic media placement and replicable visuals. The result was not just a press event, it was a movement moment, showing that housing work is as much about dignity as it is about data.

From photo stills that captured resilience to video spotlights that chronicled preservation and healing, our campaign demonstrated that when you lead with people, the message lands deeper and lasts longer. This was housing communication as advocacy, as education, and as proof of impact. In a time of political division and public fatigue, we told stories that made housing feel real and worth fighting for.

Innovation

What made this campaign innovative wasn't just its format, but its intentional layering of purpose and emotion. We built our narrative strategy around still images that hold feeling and video stories that highlight both human resilience and system-level solutions. We brought a documentary-style approach to a government funding announcement, delivering empathy, transparency and trust in equal measure. This was innovation not in novelty, but in how authentically and effectively it connected people to policy.

At Minnesota Housing, we've long recognized the power of storytelling. But this year, we took it further. Our annual funding announcement transformed into a story-first media campaign that not only informed but moved people, anchored in the lived experiences of those most impacted by housing instability.

The spark came from the teachings of Dr. Tiffany Manuel. Her research on shifting narratives around housing equity guided our approach. We wanted to do more than announce numbers, we wanted to show why it matters, who it impacts, and how the systems we lead must respond.

This meant rethinking everything: from our scripting to our camera angles to our press strategy. We centered people. We framed their journeys through still photography and video in a way that held emotional gravity. The photos were more than illustrations, they were vessels for emotion, capturing the quiet strength of a mother reflecting on a year of uncertainty, or the visible relief of a resident stepping into stability. When people see themselves reflected in stories, they connect, and our photography helped make that possible.

We layered in data and systems thinking without overwhelming. The result was a unified message: this work is human, urgent and working. And we didn't just stop at announcing. Each video, image and interview was designed to have a second life, on social media, in press coverage and in policy discussions. These stories weren't background, they were the message.

Our approach made the announcement not just a milestone, but a movement. The campaign created a playbook for how to humanize policy without losing strategic focus, and how to deliver emotional resonance while building public trust.

Replicability

This wasn't a one-time strategy, it was a replicable model. Dr. Tiffany Manuel outlines [ten narrative strategies to counter NIMBYism](#) and foster understanding of housing as a public good, and we used those principles as our framework:

- **#1, #3:** We told a "Story of Us," highlighting shared values and collective responsibility.
- **#4, #5, #6:** We tied housing to economic mobility, educational outcomes and racial equity.
- **#8, #10:** We demonstrated how smart housing policy creates better futures, and how everyone from state agencies to nonprofits to residents can play a role.

Technically, this campaign was designed to be plug-and-play. All videos were shot using a Sony mirrorless camera with natural lighting, ambient sound and a mobile, documentary-style approach. We scouted locations with meaning to participants, like the front steps of Bickham Court, and used tight, emotion-first framing to keep viewers close to the people at the center of the work. The interviews were unscripted and lightly guided to allow for authenticity, which created moments that were both intimate and powerful.

Each asset was edited for multiple uses from full-length features to short-form social clips and produced in a modular format that makes it easy for partners or other HFAs to repurpose. Whether you're a policymaker, communications lead or grassroots advocate, these tools can be re-edited or remixed to tell your own story. This wasn't just content; it was a library of reusable narrative resources ready to share, replicate, and scale.

Engagement

The stories spoke for themselves. Our earned media success this year surpassed expectations, not because we pitched harder, but because the content resonated.

- **Star Tribune** spotlighted a first-time developer of color meeting the needs of overlooked communities in St. Cloud.
- **Minnesota Public Radio** featured Bickham Court in a long-format conversation where a vital housing community for mothers was rescued from bankruptcy.

At Bickham Court, families had endured what one resident described as a year that tested every corner of their strength eviction threats, ownership limbo and constant fear of displacement. The preservation effort not only kept mothers and children housed, it restored their sense of agency and safety. A mother told us, "It was like a weight was lifted off my shoulders."

This is the story we shared, and it's one that resonated deeply with press, policymakers and the public. The videos put names and faces to resilience. Our storytelling helped audiences understand not just what we do, but why it matters. We saw partners reposting, residents commenting and stakeholders referencing the videos in follow-up meetings. The conversation lasted well beyond the press conference. And in our world, longevity is impact. Our partners showed up, media showed up, and the public kept showing up in the comments and reshares long after the event.

Watch the announcement: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_uqIGIDM_o

Bickham Court feature: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uu29gfAcVY8>

Website Article: <https://mnhousing.gov/agency-news/article/2024-project-selections-blog>

Measurable Results

- Deep dive features in Minnesota’s two most influential media outlets
- Standing room-only attendance at the event
- Ongoing reshares and dialogue across social media and partner networks
- Lasting visibility for projects and their impact on families and communities
- Increased interest from new partners asking how to be featured in future announcements

Cost-Benefit

We also had a unique advantage in producing this content: We have an in-house storyteller who brings lived expertise with housing instability that allows them to connect authentically with the communities most impacted. Their experience enables them to build trust quickly and tell stories with a level of depth and resonance that’s hard to replicate. This shifted the tone and quality of our content enabling high-impact, low-cost storytelling grounded in real experiences.

This was one of the most significant cost-benefit wins of the project. We relied on relationships, authenticity, and strategic alignment not expensive external contracts. Because the work was done in-house and already part of our existing scope, we were able to deliver strong results without needing additional procurement or time-consuming vendor management.

In fact, we’d strongly recommend other HFAs consider hiring communications staff with lived experience of housing instability. It streamlines the entire process from concept development to community engagement. We’ve all dealt with the barriers of working with marketing firms that don’t fully grasp the concepts, language, or day-to-day realities of the work. Too often, managing those contracts becomes more work than the work itself. And because the creative development happened internally, we now have adaptable templates, visual identities and workflows that make future storytelling even more efficient. The investment is already paying off not just in content delivered, but in capacity built.

Strategic Alignment

We didn’t just meet our agency’s strategic objectives, we embodied them:

- **Improved the housing system** by showing it in action
- **Strengthened communities** by honoring their stories and leadership
- **Preserved and created opportunities** by highlighting preservation wins and new development
- **Advanced equity and antiracism** by showing who is served, who leads, and who benefits
- **Modeled innovation** by fusing data and story in a way that invites belief and belonging
- **Supported service-connected housing** by demonstrating how partners rally to protect vulnerable families
- **Built trust with the public** in a time of growing political division

In a political climate where housing conversations are increasingly contentious, storytelling becomes strategy. Our 2024 campaign proved that. It showed that press events can be more than announcements, they can be catalysts. That’s why we’re honored to share it with our NCSHA peers.

We won this award in 2021. But this year, we didn’t just repeat our success, we redefined it. We showed how to do more with what we already had. How to lift not just data, but dignity. And how to make housing storytelling not just an art, but a strategy.

Visual Appendix





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Soon, this community can finally replace their entire electrical system—which is 50+ years old. We're so happy to be able to support Genevieve, Rose and the many residents who call Bonnevista Terrace home. 🍷

See what else we're funding here: <https://lnkd.in/gwC5jWvH>



“This is a great community. People care about their homes. They care about their yards. They care about their neighbors.”

*—Genevieve & Rose,
residents of Bonnevista
Terrace*



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Great things are possible when nonprofits pair up with state funding. 💕

Want the whole story? Give this [MPR News](#) interview (with Bickham Court resident Corinne) a listen.

<https://lnkd.in/gWKP93vu>



“When Trellis bought the property, I cried. This burden I was carrying was finally lifted.”

—Amber, Bickham Resident



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We provide the funding; they provide the vision, grit and knowledge. 🏠👨👩👦

🌈 Learn about Dreamliner Estates and the rest of our 2024 Project Selections here:

<https://lnkd.in/gwC5jWvH>



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